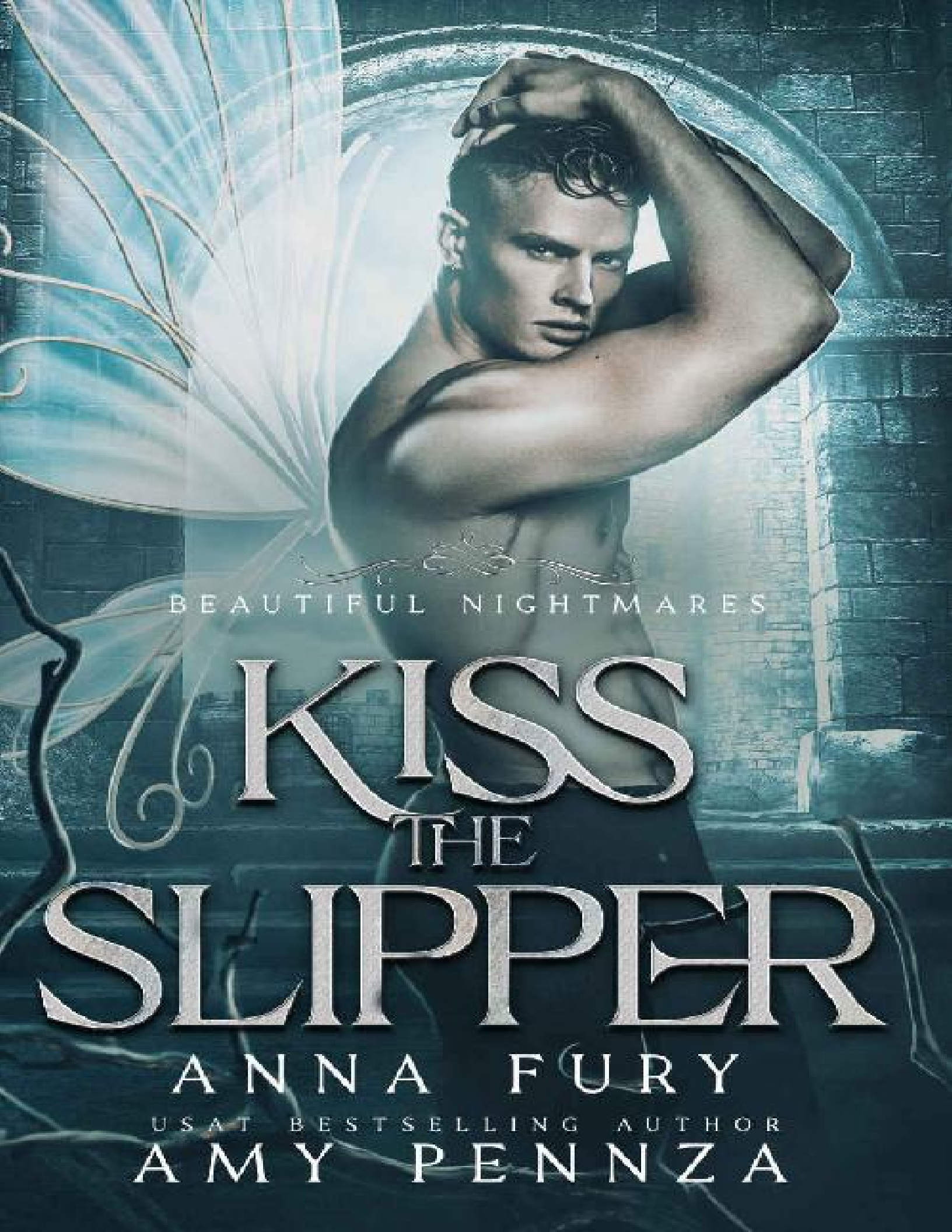
BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES
KISS
THE
SLIPPER
ANNA FURY
USAT BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AMY PENNZA

KISS THE SLIPPER

AN MM CINDERELLA RETELLING

BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES

BOOK FIVE

ANNA FURY

AMY PENNZA

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CONTENT NOTICE

Kiss the Slipper is intended for mature audiences due to adult themes that might be triggering for sensitive readers. These include on-page murder, battle scenes, mention of parental death, and violence.

While the themes of this retelling feel dark, the deep love between our characters is a beautiful light at the end of the tunnel. This book ends with a happily ever after.

Take care of yourself, and email us with any questions.
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PART ONE

SPRING

CHAPTER 1

JASPER

"Paris in spring," I say with a sigh. "Has there ever been a bigger cliché?"

I wait a moment, my gaze on the twisted, warped Eiffel Tower piercing a pale blue sky. The heady scent of flowers fills the air. Even on the outskirts of the city, I swear I can hear someone swearing in French—a distinctive "merde" floating on the wind. "Well," I amend, "maybe pissed-off Frenchmen are a bigger cliche."

When my companion stays silent, I look up at him. "What, you don't agree?"

Fuoco swings his green snout toward me, the look in his reptilian eyes decidedly irritated. I can't communicate with him the way I can with some animals, but speech isn't necessary with this particular beast. Even in dragon form, the Lord of the Fire Syndicate has a knack for making his displeasure known without saying a word.

"Oh come on, flame zaddy, it wasn't *that* bad flying with me." I let a smile touch my lips. "Although, I confess I'm a little chafed. It's been a while since I had something that big and hard between my thighs."

Fuoco shifts in a blink. Before I can draw a breath, seven-feet-plus of muscled, nude syndicate ruler glowers down at me. A large emerald glows in the center of his chest. A green scale pattern ripples from his neck to the tops of his meaty thighs. Green flames dance around his head.

"Hot," I breathe, fanning my face.

His fangs flash as he leans over me and speaks in a growl. "I've lost count of the number of times I've asked you to stop calling me *flame zaddy*."

I stretch my wings, craning my head over my shoulder to study the edges. "You know," I muse, "before the Veil fell, human airplanes had flight attendants." I arch my back, savoring the stretch for a moment before I meet Fuoco's gaze and level a look at him. "They brought passengers alcohol and snacks, Fuoco."

"I'm aware, Lilygully. I was there." He folds his thick arms over his chest. "And rest assured, you would have been on every no-fly list in the world."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It *is* a bad thing—"

"And anyway, it's not fair that you dragons have a monopoly on air travel these days." I wave a hand in the direction of the ocean. "Two days to cross the Atlantic, and you were a positive beast the entire time. I mean, I know you're eager to get back to Beau, who is probably at this very moment sitting in one of the castle windows pining for you, but they say distance makes the heart grow fonder. Don't you think you two could use a break?"

"Jasper…"

"Gods, your *bed* could use a break." I flutter my wings, sending a small gust of wind into Fuoco. As he grimaces and tosses the hair from his eyes, I inject mild reproach into my tone. "If wood could talk, m'lord, it would say *uncle*."

A muscle twitches in Fuoco's jaw. "Don't you have some kind of appointment?" He glances at the Parisian skyline. "I thought you were overdue at court."

"Admit it, you're going to miss me."

His tone turns long-suffering. "Are you okay on your own?" He flicks another look at the city, then narrows his eyes at me. "Do you need an escort to Mab's court?"

Cheeky dragon. I let it slip once that I was late for a meeting at court. I didn't say which court, but Fuoco clearly put two and two together. Undoubtedly, he'd love to know where Mab keeps her throne. But Mab doesn't blab—at least not about our headquarters.

I smile and dust my wings together. "I can handle myself, thanks, Daddy. I've been to Paris a time or ten."

Fuoco grunts. Then his features soften. He unfolds his arms and gives my shoulder an awkward pat. "I, uh, wanted to thank you, Jasper." Another pat. "For everything you did to help Beau and me get together."

Satisfaction thrums in my chest. *If only you knew, you big, sexy oaf.* But he can't know. If there's a universal truth about the ancients among the Myth, it's that they don't appreciate being manipulated. The older and more powerful the monster, the less tolerant they are of other beings meddling in their business.

And, well, meddling is one of my primary charms. Literally.

I tilt my head. "From what I've seen—and heard—you and Beau get together just fine on your own."

He snorts and drops his hand. "Stay out of trouble, Lillygully."

"I always do."

For a moment, something shimmers in Fuoco's green eyes. His voice goes gruff. "I mean it, pixie. The Hallows would be less…colorful without you." His brows pull together as he glances at Paris once more. "I feel like maybe I should go into the city with you."

The hair on my nape lifts. A sense of unease drifts through me as I follow the direction of Fuoco's glance. Some dragons have the gift of precognition. But that's not Fuoco's talent. "Why?" I force a smile. "Do you know something I don't?"

"No." He clears his throat, and his eyes clear too. "I'm sorry. Just being fanciful, I guess. And maybe I got used to you being around the castle." He grunts again. "I don't know if I'll be able to handle the quiet."

"I'm sure you and Beau will think of something."

Shaking his head, Fuoco turns and walks the narrow path that leads away from the city. When he's a dozen steps away, he shifts back into his dragon form, his green scales shimmering in the late morning sunlight. With a powerful beat of his wings, he launches into the sky.

"Show off," I murmur, smiling as I bat my much smaller, less spectacular wings.

Bert wriggles in my breast pocket, and I unbutton my jacket so he can poke his head out. He watches as Fuoco shrinks into the distance, then lifts his dark eyes to mine. His high-pitched voice fills my head. *"Mab won't like it if you're late."*

Bossy mouse.

I roll my eyes. "Please. Like she's ever been on time in her life." Which is saying something, considering she's quite possibly older than dirt.

But Bert has a point. Besides, I'm in Paris for a very important reason.

Adulation. Today kicks off my victory lap, and I'm ready to accept my accolades, thank you very much.

"Let's go, then," I tell Bert. I take two steps, then stop and look down at him. "Are you wearing a sweater?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." I scratch between his ears and continue toward the city. Bert scrambles from my pocket and runs up to my shoulder.

"You're smiling."

"I'm not," I say in his head. Because I'm definitely fighting a smile, and it'll be more obvious if I speak aloud.

Bert's voice in my head squeaks with indignation. *"Mert said it looked nice."*

"He would." Bert's twin brother has abysmal taste.

"What's wrong with the sweater, Jasper?" Bert demands, tugging sharply on my ear.

"Ow!" I jerk my head away. When he continues tugging at me, I pluck him from my shoulder and bring him level with my face. "Nothing is wrong with it," I say gently. "It's just that you're not wearing any pants."

He looks down at himself. Then he looks back up. *"You didn't wear pants to that party in the centaur's room the other night."*

I mull it over. "Hmm. Good point."

"I can think of at least fifty other instances where you spent the evening entirely pantsless."

"True."

"Then there was that whole month with the jockstrap thing—"

"Say no more."

"Luke calls it The Jockstrap Incident. When he's drunk, he calls it The Empire Strikes Crack."

"Does he, really?" Mice are naturally sarcastic, but Luke takes it to criminal levels. I place Bert on my shoulder. "I like to think of it as more of a saga."

Bert nods as I resume walking. *"Makes sense. You were dating a berserker."*

"Ugh, he was a handful. And not the kind of handful you want in a man." I glance at Bert. "The sweater is adorable, by the way."

"Shut up."

Twenty minutes later, we stroll along the banks of the Seine, which bustles with human and Myth creatures selling food and souvenirs. The Eiffel Tower looms large, its twisted spire warped by magic. According to legend, the iron structure was one of the first victims of The War That Ripped the Veil. Humans do a lot of finger-pointing, but no one really knows who started it. And it doesn't really matter, since no one can change the outcome. One now-extinct country launched nukes at another. The other retaliated. Their neighbors panicked and launched more.

And then everything went *kaboom*. The blasts were so powerful, they destroyed the Veil that separated the human plane from the magical realm. Magic rushed into places it was never meant to dwell, devouring human technology and reducing glass and concrete to dust. Airplanes dropped from the skies, which suddenly teemed with dragons, gargoyles, and griffins.

And pixies.

A smile tugs at my lips as I dip into an alley. Pausing, I look over my shoulder, my gaze on the passersby near the river.

"No one followed us," Bert says in my head. *"I kept an eye out."*

I reach up and tweak his tail. *"You always do, friend."*

"I don't have a choice. Not with you admiring yourself in every reflective surface we pass."

"Can you blame me?" I reach a small wooden door at the end of the alley. Stepping to the right of it, I kneel and loosen a pebble from the crumbling base of the stone wall. As I straighten, the wall turns transparent. Magic lashes from the other side, long fingers licking over my skin. Tasting me. An instant later, the wave of power bows.

Passage granted.

I reach up and fist bump Bert. Then I step through the wall into a corridor lined with will-o'-the-wisp lanterns. They bob greetings as I head toward the audience chamber. A thumping bass bounces down the corridor, the beat vibrating the stones under my feet.

"Sounds like a party," Bert says.

"The biggest in the Myth," I murmur. A pair of tall, golden doors loom before us. Just as we reach them, a pixie with a bushy red beard steps from an alcove. A squirrel rushes up his shoulder and gives me an arrogant look. The pixie holds a clipboard, his nails painted with polish a shade brighter than his hair and one shade darker than his lipstick. His wings sift silvery dust onto the floor.

"Hey, Rufus," I say. "How's it hanging?" I glance at his kilt, which hits well above the knee. "Not too low, I hope."

"Wouldn't you love to know," Queen Mab's steward rumbles in his thick brogue. He looks behind me as if he's searching for someone. "Your mum with you?"

"Not this time." I examine my own manicure in the lantern light. "She's in the Maldives with my fathers." I look up. "And their boyfriend."

Rufus lifts a brow. "Titania always did like variety."

"I don't see it lasting." I lean in and lower my voice. "He's a rage demon."

"Temperamental."

"You have no idea."

"Oh, I do."

I lean back. "That's right! You dated that tall drink of water from London."

Rufus grins. "Got a poke from a bloke." His grin fades as he scratches his beard. "That's an accurate description, actually. For a demon, he wasn't all that skilled at delivering his packages, if you catch my meaning."

The squirrel on his shoulder chatters in his ear, its bushy tail swishing over the steward's leather harness.

"Aye, I'm gettin' to it. Can't two old friends catch up?" Rufus lays a hand on one of the ornate door knobs and slants me a look. "You ready to join the party, Lilygully?"

Excitement shivers down my spine. I flick my wings and put my shoulders back. "It's not a party until I show up."

"Arrogant much?"

I wink at Rufus as I drop my glamour completely. In the doors' shiny surface, my ears taper to points. My hair, which I wore bright green today just to fuck with Fuoco, turns its natural shock of platinum. My features grow sharper and otherworldly, and a faint glow rises from my skin.

"You missed a spot," the steward snarks.

Gaze on the door, I give Rufus the middle finger.

"You wish," he says. With a good-natured snort, he pushes the doors open. The bass swells, the thumping beat interspersed with the chatter of hundreds of pixies. They cluster at the rear of the throne room's antechamber, where they wait to speak to Queen Mab. Color blooms everywhere, from the

red, diamond-patterned walls to the fuchsia ceiling. More will-o'-the-wisps hang in strings across the antechamber, their flames bobbing green, orange, and red. Spun-sugar clouds drift overhead, illuminated from within by twinkling sparks of lightning someone must have charmed to stay within the fluffy confines. In an alcove covered in glittering quartz and spun-gold accents, a trio of musicians play instruments from beyond the Veil. A tall pixie with black hair and black-tipped wings shreds a bass guitar.

Heads turn as pixies catch sight of me. The crowd surges in my direction, and smiling faces and fluttering wings surround me as I move toward the throne room's doors.

I don't get far.

"There he is!" someone calls. As more heads swivel in my direction, exclamations ripple through the crowd.

"Jasper!"

"Ooh, he's here!"

"Nice work in the Hallows, Lilygully!"

"Yeah, baby, he matched all four of those dickheads."

Slapping sounds. "You can't call the syndicate lords dickheads!"

"Sorry. Cockheads."

Someone thrusts a marker at me. "Will you sign my tits?"

The marker-wielding pixie's companion elbows her in the ribs. "Not enough room on those mosquito bites."

"Not everything can be as big as your ass, Vivica."

Shaking my head, I murmur greetings and thanks. Slowly, I maneuver through the crush. After a few dozen handshakes, I make it to my destination. A female pixie in a purple minidress stands at the throne room's doors, a bubble of pink chewing gum slowly expanding from her mouth. Her blue eyes regard me impassively as the gum balloons.

"*Hi*, Dahlia," I say deliberately. Bert makes huffy noises in my head, his tail swishing against my shoulder. Mab's herald is notorious prickly. Most pixies are merry. Dahlia is…not.

Pop! Dahlia sucks the gum into her mouth. "What up."

"I have an audience with the queen." I wave a dismissive hand. "You know, to tell her all about how I matched the four syndicate lords of the Hallows with their mates. No big deal."

"Uh-huh." Dahlia's jaw works as she chews her gum. "Couple people ahead of you."

"Ridiculous," Bert hisses in my head.

I give Dahlia my most winning smile—the one that charmed an entire horde of orcs into abandoning their weapons and joining an orgy that's supposedly still going on somewhere in the south of France. "Are you sure?" I sift my wings, gold glitter spilling from the edges. "Maybe you should check your list."

Dahlia blows a small bubble and pops it. "Oh yeah? Lemme check." She waits a beat. "Yup. Still a few people ahead of you."

Bert sputters in my mind. *"Preposterous! This is—"*

"It's fine," I say through clenched teeth.

His tail whips my arm. *"Maybe she misplaced the list in her gum."*

"I'll wait." Swinging away, I flick my wings as I move into the crowd. I'm in Paris to get my hero's welcome, and now I'm stuck in a fucking queue. Ignoring Bert's mental bitching, I let my gaze wander around the packed chamber. As the guitar riff changes, I make eye contact with the tall pixie playing the bass. Recognition tingles within me as a slow smile spreads across his face.

"Ugh," I say under my breath.

Bert halts his tirade and curls his tail around my shoulder. *"Hey, don't you know him?"* Bert waits a beat. *"Biblically?"*

"Don't remind me." The guitarist flutters his wings as he holds my stare. *"Gods, I used to think those black tips were so edgy."*

"Mmm, your bad boy era."

"More like just bad. No need to bring the boy into it." I tear my gaze away, my irritation growing. But another emotion rises, too. One I've done my best to ignore over the past few months. At first, I couldn't figure it out. For weeks, I delayed my trip to Paris as I grappled with the unfamiliar feeling—a mix of boredom and frustration. And not the sexual kind. Bert teased me about shedding my pants at the centaur's party. What he doesn't know is that I drank water all night and ducked back to my room to *read a book*.

For the first time in my life, flirting feels forced. Almost tedious.

"Bert?" I ask cautiously in my head. *"Am I getting old?"*

"You're ninety-three. That's like five in Myth years. I'm surprised you can wipe your own ass."

I sigh as the crowd continues its chatter around me. *"You say the sweetest things."*

Something bumps me hard from behind, making me lurch forward.

"Hey!" I whirl in a flurry of agitated wings—and suck in a breath.

A golden god stands before me, everything about him like honey melting on a summer day. I tip my head back—*way* back—as I take him in. Tall, ripped, hot as fuck. Golden-brown hair waves back from a broad, unlined forehead. Golden eyes blink rapidly, surprise in the thickly lashed depths.

"I'm deeply sorry," the god says, offering a slight bow. His dark suit hugs his body, which is muscled under the expensive cloth. And he is *very* expensive, this god. Spicy cologne and notes of sandalwood and leather reach me, making my toes curl in my boots. As he straightens, I bite back a groan. Sweet mother of Puck, he looks like he could break me over his knee.

He's also spilling magic like a poorly trained waiter with a water pitcher. It hovers around him, just barely contained by his glamour. If he's a pixie, he's an exceptionally skilled one. Few Myth creatures can hide their true form from me for long. And he's *got* to be a pixie. Mab never admits other kinds of creatures to her court.

The god's brows pull together as he searches my gaze. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

"Don't ask him if he wants to," Bert chimes in my head.

"Why not?" I mutter.

"I beg your pardon?" the god asks, his frown deepening.

"Don't ask him if he wants you to beg," Bert says.

"Silence," I hiss.

The god blinks, confusion in his gorgeous eyes. As he opens his mouth, Dahlia's voice rises above the crowd.

"Jasper Lilygully, beloved nephew of Queen Mab!"

The music stops. All eyes turn to me.

Dahlia throws the doors open, her wings gone bright silver. As she turns back to the crowd, she spreads an arm toward the throne room visible between the doors. "Make way for Jasper, the most accomplished matchmaker in a generation!"

Applause erupts. Several pixies cup their hands around their mouths and whoop. Someone claps my shoulder. "Congratulations, Jasper!"

"Get 'em, baby!"

"J to the A," a burly pixie with a backward baseball cap hoots.

Smiling, I move through the crowd, the golden-eyed god slipping from my thoughts. Cheering pixies flank me until I reach the throne room's doors. As I step inside, Dahlia pops her gum before pulling the doors shut. The noise of the crowd and the thumping bass cuts off—and the sound of beating wings replaces it.

A purple runner sweeps up a black diamond-patterned floor. At the end of the runner, Queen Mab sits on a golden throne with crimson cushions, her leather-clad legs propped on one arm and crossed at the ankle. Spiky stilettos adorn her feet. Her white-blond hair is wound in two buns that perch precariously on either side of her head. Hummingbirds flit around her, pausing briefly here and there to whisper in her ear.

"Jasper!" she exclaims, swinging her legs off the throne. Rising, she waves me forward, her gossamer wings shedding silver dust. "Get over here! I wanna hear everything."

"Aunt Mab," I say, striding up the runner with a grin splitting my face. When I reach Mab, she yanks me into a cherry-scented hug. Hummingbirds buzz around us, tiny wings beating the air.

Mab eases back and beams at me. "They said you couldn't do it, but I always believed in you."

"Thanks. Wait, who said I couldn't do it?"

She waves a hand. "Oh, everyone." A hummingbird darts forward and hovers at her shoulder. She tilts her head, listening intently as the bird speaks in her mind. "Sure, tell him I said it's fine, but if he fills the swimming pool with champagne again, I'll bring back the guillotine." As the bird darts off, she offers me a small smile. "The bubbles are terrible for the filters."

I nod solemnly.

Mab links her arm through mine and leads me away from the throne. "Soooo, spill it. Which one of those big, bad men was the hardest to deal with and why was it Wotan?"

For the next few minutes, we chat about my mission, which was top-secret until about a month ago. I still don't know why Mab was determined to see the syndicate lords mated. When I asked her the day she gave me the assignment, she lifted a casual shoulder and said, "Why not?"

Undoubtedly, my aunt has her reasons. Or maybe she just wanted to see the rulers of the Hallows brought to their knees.

Not that I tricked them in any way. Matchmaking doesn't work like that. No, I merely helped them along. Tipped my hand. Steered the ship through rocky waters.

"And what of Ari Razorfin?" Mab asks, her wings glowing more brightly. "Hot, right?"

"Scorching. But so angry. Hot angry. Hangry? You know what I mean."

Mab flings a hand out. "I mean, it's not *that* far off. What with the whole cannibalism thing."

"I know. And why is that also hot? Is something wrong with us?"

"I'm afraid to meet him in a dark alley, and I *like* it."

We both shiver. Then she tips her head to the side. "I'm proud of you, Jasper. With this accomplishment, you've cemented your status as one of Fate's most dependable helpers. Yours is an uncommon gift."

My insides warm. I brace myself for her to announce she's promoting me to a new position at court. Maybe even Chief Matchmaker, a role that has stood empty since my grandfather died.

Mab opens her mouth.

A hummingbird flits to her ear, its wings a blur.

"Oh!" my aunt says, facing the doors. "He is?" She looks at me with a distracted air. "Uh, I have to take this, Jasper. We'll talk later, okay?"

The doors fly open, and Dahlia's voice rolls through the throne room. "Prince Abelin Vale of the

Summer Court!"

Gasps ring out from the antechamber. A second later, the golden god steps past Dahlia. Only he's not a god. He's an *elf*. Still hot as the sun, but now his glamour is down, revealing pointed ears and the perfect, glowing skin only the elves can achieve. His hair shimmers like molten honey.

Confusion pummels me. An elf in the pixie court? And not just any elf—a royal prince. As in, the highest and mightiest.

What in the hot fuck is an elven prince doing mingling among pixies? Our two peoples share a common ancestor, but the family tree split ages ago. In the intervening millennia, our differences have only grown wider. The snobs of the Myth, elves keep to themselves, rarely descending from their ivory towers. Immensely powerful, they look down their elegant noses at pixies. To them, we're the embarrassing distant cousin. A low-rent version of the real thing.

Mab slips past me, her wings suddenly trailing bright-gold dust. "Your Highness! Please, come in."

The prince darts a look at me before offering my aunt a stately bow. "Your Majesty."

"Oy!" Rufus appears out of nowhere and jabs me in the ribs.

I round on him, anger spiking. "What the fuck?"

Rufus jerks his head toward a small door behind the throne. "This is a high-profile visit. Mab'll take it alone."

Is he serious right now? I draw myself up, but murmuring pulls my attention back to the doors. Prince Abelin bows over my aunt's hand and kisses her knuckles.

"The pleasure is completely mine, Your Majesty."

Puck's beard, is that a slight French accent?

Mab's wings flutter, golden pixie dust spilling onto the throne room floor. I got silver.

"Jasper," Rufus says sharply under his breath.

"I'm going," I mutter, turning and stalking to the side door. Bert chatters in my head, but I ignore him as I wrench the door open and make my way down the dimly lit corridor.

I got silver.

It's the only thought that pounds through my head as I step through the portal that takes me back into the heart of Paris.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I'M STILL FUMING AS I WIND MY WAY THROUGH THE NARROW STREETS OF ST. Germain. Humans and Myth creatures dine at sidewalk cafes. More than one hot guy gives me a second look as I pass. Normally, I'd look right back, but I can't talk to anyone right now. Not when my head is stuffed full of images of the elven prince.

"Abelin," I tell Bert through our mental bond. *"What kind of name is that?"*

"Elvish, apparently."

I clench my jaw. That fucker stole my spotlight. After months of planning and scheming, of hopping from syndicate to syndicate, I finally accomplished my mission. I watched other people fall in love. At heart, every pixie is a matchmaker. It's our thing. Well, that and hexing assholes who deserve it. But I'm damn good at shepherding Fate. It was no small feat to match all four syndicate lords. I was ready for a little recognition.

And then boom. Elf-bombed.

I glance down at Bert, who peeks from my jacket pocket. *"Who does he think he is, waltzing into our court? He flirted with Mab. That takes balls."*

"Which you were definitely thinking about."

I grunt as I slip into the shadows under a striped awning. *"Not anymore. I wouldn't touch him with a—"*

A hand clamps down on my shoulder. Before I can react, I'm spun around and faced with a familiar broad chest. Prince Abelin's glamour is back up, but he's no less stunning with the Parisian sun slanting over him. Spiky, black lashes cast shadows on his cheeks as he appears to catch his breath.

I pull from his grip. "How did you find me?"

Humor—and maybe a touch of arrogance—gleams in his eyes. "You're not the only one with an animal familiar."

Right. How could I forget? Elves commune with beasts the same as pixies. Of course, they do it better and fancier, bonding with one creature at a young age. Their familiars are usually some kind of mythical beast. I glance around, looking for a phoenix or a hellhound.

"I'm sorry to stop you like this," the prince says. "I hope I didn't startle you." He flashes a wry grin, showing perfect, white teeth. "You're faster than you look."

Anger sparks—along with a flash of heat I ignore. "Fast for a pixie, you mean."

His perfect brows pull together. "I, uh…no. I didn't mean it that way." His throat bobs. "Look, I'm really sorry about what happened back there."

I fold my arms. "Oh, yeah? You looked really sorry."

"I am. I had no idea the herald was going to announce me during your audience." Another throat bob, which is *not* sexy. "Would you let me make it up to you?"

Awareness tingles down my spine, bumping over the base of my wings, which are stuffed under my glamour. I've been hit on enough to know when a man is interested.

The prince's eyes fill with unmistakable anticipation. "Say yes," he says softly. "Have lunch with me. Make me a happy man today, Jasper Lilygully."

My breath hitches. If I had buttons, this elf just smashed the whole fucking panel. Still, I can't let him win that easily.

I raise a brow. "Does that line work on everyone, Abelin?"

"Not everyone." His gaze dips to my mouth. "But I'm really hoping it'll work on you." Golden eyes lift to mine. "And please, call me Vale."

Something inside me loosens. "Vale," I repeat, my voice sounding far away and sort of breathless.

The prince's lips curve. "Vale Gentry."

Gentry. A common surname the elves use when they move among humans.

But there's nothing common about this prince. And, dammit, I'm going to say yes. I shouldn't. I really fucking shouldn't. But fuck me, he's hot. And he owes me.

"Fine," I hear myself say. "I'll let you buy me lunch, Vale Gentry."

CHAPTER 2

VALE

"Great!" I say, my voice bright with enthusiasm. I clear my throat, admonishing myself to behave as the heir to the Summer Court should. But I've already accomplished today's mission. I did exactly what I told my father I'd do.

Jasper's startlingly blue eyes narrow, as if he thinks I'm somehow luring him into a trap.

He's so beautiful I can barely breathe. His glamour is up, but even that is stunning. Short platinum hair. A delicate but nevertheless masculine bone structure. Pouty lips that draw my gaze over and over. His eyelids are smeared with some kind of shimmery paint. His clothes hug his lithe body, hinting at muscle through his chest and shoulders.

The intense need to touch him courses through me—sunbursts of longing that radiate along my skin. I shove both hands in my pockets to avoid temptation. I really shouldn't be here, asking a gorgeous, definitely mischievous pixie to lunch.

Yet I can't find it in me to stop.

Instead, I smile. "Are you up for a walk?" I tilt my head toward the heart of the 17th arrondissement. "We can either go somewhere with a great view, or a place that serves my favorite dish in all of Paris. Your pick."

Jasper's expression hardens, although there's interest in the way he stares at me, like he's trying to sort out what puzzle all of my pieces go to. "Is this some kind of a trick?"

"No trick," I murmur. "Just lunch."

I'm not sure if I'm trying to convince him or myself. Maybe both. There's nothing *wrong* with me taking him to lunch. He's the pixie queen's nephew. It's a smart political move to learn more about him. I tell myself that's why I'm doing it, and not because I'm fucking entranced by his wings, or the cocksure expression he's worn since the moment I first saw him in Mab's court. It most definitely has nothing to do with how I want to strip every piece of clothing from his lean body and explore him with my teeth and tongue.

"Fine, then," he says. "Your favorite food." He lifts his chin. "But if it's something hoity-toity and disgusting, I'm not eating it."

I laugh. "Not hoity-toity. It includes fried potatoes, and I promise it's deliciously edible. You'll be licking your fingers." I can't help the look I cast him, and I don't miss the way his nostrils flare. I didn't mean it to sound so sensual, but I seem unable to hold myself back today.

Jasper's the one to clear his throat this time. He gestures up the street with one elegant hand. His nails are painted with purple and black diamonds—perhaps a nod to Mab's ostentatious throne room. "Lead the way, Your Majesty."

"Vale," I correct gently. "I prefer Vale. And majesty is reserved for my father. But maybe I should

call you Your Highness?"

Jasper shakes his head. "Only Mab uses a title."

"But you're her nephew."

The tips of his wings turn pink. "Yeah, well, I guess we've let that cat out of the bag."

"Was it a secret?"

His blue gaze turns shrewd. "You're the Prince of the Summer Court. You know damn well it was a secret."

"But not anymore." I let a smile touch my lips. "People are going to want to know more about you, Jasper. And I'm the first in line."

The interest that's been brewing in his eyes flares higher. "You're a very forward man, Prince Vale."

"Just Vale. And you're right. I don't beat around the bush when I see something I want. So… lunch?"

Dark eyelashes flutter, but he gives me a quick nod.

I've always had the gift of reading people well. It's not Myth magic, per se, just something I've honed over years of dealing with my godsawful stepmother and difficult father.

Jasper wears confidence and snark as easily as he does his beautiful glamour. What would I find if I stripped all that away? Who lies beneath those layers of sarcasm and deflection?

I want to know.

I shoot him my broadest grin as I lead us up the street. "My favorite spot is in Villette, about a twenty-minute walk."

"I thought Villette was mostly residential."

I flash him another smile. "It is…mostly."

Twenty minutes pass in a blur. We talk about why he was in Mab's court and the matchmaking coup he pulled off in the Hallows. It's obvious he's incredibly proud of what he accomplished there. Guilt rips at my chest knowing my presence stole his limelight. If I'd known, I would have delayed my audience with Mab.

I duck off the main thoroughfare and onto a small cobblestone path, pushing through overgrown shrubbery to clear the way.

Jasper peers through the foliage and cuts me a sharp look. "You're not trying to murder me, are you? Mab would shit a brick if I got massacred. She loves me, you know."

It's on the tip of my tongue to joke that there's *something* I'd like to stab him with, and it's not a weapon, but I hold back. He doesn't know me, and despite his dry tone, he might actually be worried. I did just hold a shrub open and ask him to step through it.

"No murder, just moules-frites." I gesture ahead of us. About forty yards away, an ancient-looking wooden door stands open, propped in place with a bucket of oyster shells. The salty smell of seafood wafts up the alley toward us.

Jasper steps through the hole I made, his suspicious expression transforming into a stunning smile. I want more of those smiles, preferably aimed directly at me. I shove my hands back into my pockets. I'm going to touch him if I don't.

When he catches me checking him out, his expression grows cocky. "You're staring, Vale."

"Because you're stunning," I say. "And I can't take my eyes off you."

He tips his head to one side. "If you're just trying to get me into bed, Abelin, it's going to take a lot more than sweet words. That said, keep the sweet words flowing. I'm not entirely immune to flattery."

I grin at his teasing. I'd love for him to be in my bed. I bet he's absolutely radiant when he comes.

But he called me Abelin again. The not-really-Jasper mask is back.

Still, I'm a patient man. I'll pull that mask off piece by piece, starting with lunch.

"It's Vale," I remind him, gesturing toward the restaurant. "Shall we?"

TWO HOURS LATER, JASPER GRINS AS I POUR HIM ANOTHER GLASS OF WHITE WINE. WE'VE POLISHED off nearly four bottles. Alcohol doesn't hit pixies and elves the way it does humans, but Jasper's cheeks are flushed and his shoulders are relaxed. The wine spreads through my veins, warming me from within.

But it's the pixie across from me who's responsible for the fire under my skin.

He waves his hand over a now-empty plate of moules-frites, the discarded shells piled high in a metal baking dish. We've long since devoured the fries that came with them. "You're telling me this moules-frites isn't even French?"

"Nope." I smile as I set the wine bottle down. "Moules-frites originated in Belgium, but they've become something of a French staple, to the point that the humans once ran a survey to find France's favorite food, and moules-frites lost by just a few thousand votes."

Jasper smirks and grabs a small chunk of the crusty bread we've been using to sop up the remaining garlic, butter, and chive. "Well, I can't be swayed. I'm still calling *this* French bread."

I snort out a laugh. "Baguette, Jasper. Doesn't that word sound so much more beautiful rolling off the tongue? Baguette!" I say the last with a flourish, my barely there french accent more pronounced.

He pops the bread in his mouth, obviously savoring it. The smile he turns on me is radiant, the mask gone. It disappeared two glasses of wine ago when he told me more about his exploits in the Hallows. Considering what he accomplished, he deserves every bit of praise he came to Paris to receive.

I rest my elbows on the table and lean forward. "So, why the secrecy with your lineage?"

Instantly, his eyes grow shuttered.

Regret nips at me. He finally lowered his guard, and now I've opened my big mouth and ruined it.

I reach across the table and touch his arm. "I won't spread the word. But as you said, *le chat est sorti du sac*." The cat is out of the bag.

His lips quirk. "Is that even a French saying?"

"No. Don't tell anyone I said that. They'll take away my passport."

Humor dances in his eyes, and relief flows through me. For a moment, we just smile at each other. I look at his mouth again because I can't fucking help it.

He notices, and the air between us grows thicker. More charged.

Finally, he settles more deeply in his seat. "I had to make my own way. I didn't want to trade on the family name."

"Ah." I pick up my wine glass. "You wanted to be known for your gifts."

"Precisely."

I raise my glass in a toast. "And you are very gifted."

He holds my gaze. "You could say that," he says softly.

My dick tightens. I drag in a deep breath as I will it to bide its damn time. Because I can't mess this up. And I shouldn't be doing *this*.

But I know I'm not going to stop.

A mouse pops its head out of Jasper's front pocket, breaking the tension. Smiling, Jasper plucks a small piece of bread from his plate and hands it to the tiny creature.

"Who is this?" I ask. Most pixies commune with animals, so it's hardly a shock to see one with him. But the rodent might be…an issue. My familiar, Sulien, is a Taranathen cat from beyond the Veil.

Jasper waves his hand at the mouse, who stares at me with round, black eyes as it munches the bread. "This is Bert. His brother, Mert, is usually with us, too, but he had business to take care of back home."

"Business, huh?" I stare at Bert, unable to help my smile. "What sort of business might you be into, Bert?"

The mouse looks up at Jasper, who tilts his head, obviously listening intently. After a second, Jasper rolls his eyes and meets my gaze. "Bert says he appreciates your thoughtful question, but we've been talking about me for hours and he'd like to know more about you." He shifts back in his seat, slinging one arm along the top of the booth. "Please," he adds, an insolent smile playing around his mouth. But there's heat in his eyes, too. Bert isn't the only one who wants to know more.

Got you. A real smile. I could eat up a million more of the same. I'm fucking fascinated by that smile.

But I can't say any of that. I shouldn't…for many reasons. Duty, honor, my people. All those responsibilities form an invisible weight on my shoulders, crushing me the way they have my entire life. Somehow, being with Jasper takes the weight away, if only for a little while.

I pick up my wine glass and swirl it, my gaze on the pale liquid. I can't tell Jasper everything about myself, no matter how much I might want to.

Don't embarrass us today, Abelin.

My stepmother's words from this morning clang around my head. I haven't embarrassed her or my father in nearly two hundred years, but she loves to remind me anyhow. Preferably in front of King Nylian himself.

I meet Jasper's gaze. I'll tell him as much of the truth as I can. "I've long abhorred the hatred between pixies and elves. Even as a younger man, it never made sense to me. We each have strengths and weaknesses. There should be partnership between us, not enmity."

Jasper's smile fades into something more cautious. But curiosity gleams in his eyes.

I barrel on. "Most elves are snobbish." Jasper snorts, and I flash a wry smile. "I know that's our reputation. I don't want it to be our future."

The curiosity in Jasper's eyes shines more brightly. "So you aim to change it?"

I nod. "For all that my father, King Nylian, is an ancient monarch, he's adapted well to modern times. Hundreds of years ago, when we still lived beyond the Veil in the Taranathen Forest, I petitioned to represent him at Mab's court. I had an idea to build a foundation of partnership between pixies and elves." Heat touches my cheeks, and I release a shaky laugh. "Unfortunately, I was something of a playboy in my first hundred years. No matter how much Father agreed with my ideas, he never allowed me to represent us anywhere."

Jasper grins. "Playboy? I like the sound of that."

"It was fun," I admit, running a hand through my glamour's golden-brown waves. "I didn't take my role seriously back then. Everything seemed like a problem for future-me to deal with. But I've worked hard in the last few hundred years to change my father's impression of me. Today was a big step."

Gods. Why did I tell him all of that? Father would be mortified at me showing my hand like this.

Spilling my guts to Mab's nephew.

But I can't stop talking. Not when Jasper's looking at me like he wants to know more—and not because his mouse pushed him to ask.

"My mother died when I was very young," I say. "Father remarried shortly after. My stepmother and I aren't…close. I think some of my earlier rebellion was probably a reaction to that relationship." I huff a humorless laugh. "Or lack thereof."

"But you're reformed," Jasper says. A polite smile touches his lips. "A playboy no longer."

The polite smile sours my gut. I want the real smile again, the one that crinkles his eyes in the corners.

I pick up the wine bottle and top off his glass. "Not a playboy anymore." I set the bottle down and push the glass toward him. When he reaches for it, I brush my fingers over his. "These days, I'm much more focused."

Just like that, sexual tension springs between us again.

I withdraw my hand and sit back.

He lifts his glass and takes a slow sip. When he lowers it, his voice is slightly husky. "What convinced your father you were ready to assume more princely duties?"

"I'm smart and powerful. Every court's elves have some degree of command over their element." I grin. "The sun is very formidable. It takes a great deal of control to wield it. Once I demonstrated a mastery over Her rays, my father knew I was serious about my role as his heir."

Jasper glances out the window. "It's gotten cloudy outside, Vale. Bring a little sun back for me?"

I'm always cautious with my gifts. Summer Court powers are easy to abuse. Elves learn that from an early age. But I need more of Jasper's true smile. And gods help me, I want to see the sun light up his delicate wings.

I follow the direction of his gaze out the window. Then I turn back to Jasper and call the sun. My magic snaps taut in my chest. Anchored there, it tugs at Her, asking for a few of Her rays to shine light through the window next to Jasper. I don't need to look up to see the clouds part. Deep within me, light blooms as shadows roll back. A moment later, golden sunlight streams through the glass and illuminates the side of Jasper's face.

In my mind's eye, I pluck at the line that connects me to Her—and I ask for a little more light. Enough to blanket my pixie like a cat in a window on a summer's day.

At once, smaller rays join together. They radiate against Jasper's skin, which gleams luminously under Her caress.

He tips his head back, a contented sigh easing from his lips. Sunlight dazzles over his cheeks, chin, and neck. His perfectly arched brows and long lashes. That pouty, irresistible mouth.

I can't look away. And I can't get involved with a man right now. But when I think about watching him walk away after lunch, I know I won't let him go. Because this is Jasper. Whatever he wants, I'll give it to him.

I don't know how long I shine the sun on him. I'm too lost staring at him to keep track. But eventually, he lowers his head and claps slowly.

"Bravo, Vale. That was incredible. Usually, I'd have a snarky comment, but I find myself very impressed."

"Good," I murmur, my voice rocky and low. Needy. Does he hear the desire in my tone? I want him to. I jerk my head toward the door. "Walk with me. Please."

When he nods, I toss two crisp bills on the tabletop and reach for him. He doesn't hesitate, just takes my hand and lets me pull him to his feet.

His gaze locks with mine, his earlier caution gone. For a moment, we just stare at each other, neither of us moving. He must feel it, too, this pull like we're two magnets desperate to meld together and become one.

Grinning, I lace my fingers with his and lead him from the restaurant and into the alley. We push through the foliage and step onto the busy main road.

And then we walk for hours, covering every topic under the sun. The conversation flows more easily than it has with anyone my whole life. Jasper has an opinion on everything, and he's not afraid to share it. He holds nothing back, dispensing wit and snark in equal measure. But he's also an excellent listener—attentive and thoughtful. At the same time, he doesn't hesitate to poke fun at me. As the afternoon wears on, I find myself letting my guard down completely. In the elvish courts, every look has meaning. Too often, words are weapons. I've played those games my entire life. It gets old fast.

I get none of that with Jasper. It's just…easy.

My familiar, Sulien, trails us quietly at a distance. I sense his presence in my mind, and then his voice fills my head.

"What are you doing?"

I keep my gaze on Jasper as I speak to Sully through our bond. *"I'm going for a walk."*

My oldest, dearest friend hisses in my head. *"And where does the walk end, my prince?"*

"Don't worry about it."

Sully makes a disgruntled sound. *"This is folly. You should put a stop to it before it gets out of hand."*

Jasper cocks his head. "You okay? You seem distracted."

"I'm perfect," I say, proffering my arm. My heart soars when he takes it. Sulien falls silent even as his irritation vibrates along our bond. His advice is sound, but I can't follow it.

Because I'm following my instinct, and every instinct I have points me to the captivating pixie with his arm looped through mine.

Don't embarrass us today, Abelin.

Screw my stepmother and her cruel words. I *did* my duty today. Now I'm going to chase happiness, because I deserve it.

Eventually, night falls. Jasper and I stop at another restaurant for dinner, where we laugh and flirt over plates of pasta. Sulien peppers our familiar bond with misgivings and increasingly insistent demands that I return home—alone.

I shut the familiar bond down hard. Jasper isn't optional to me. I know where the walk ends now. From the look in his eyes, my pixie does too.

After dinner, we sit on a bench overlooking a small offshoot of the Seine. The moon plays peekaboo with clouds that drift over the inky sky. Stars sparkle on the water. Jasper finishes the ice cream I bought him, then watches me take the last few licks of mine.

"You like vanilla?" he murmurs, his blue eyes reflecting the moonlight.

I swipe my tongue over the cold, creamy dessert, and I let some of the lust in my veins leak into my voice when I say, "Sometimes, but I'm good with variety, too."

Smiling, he crosses one lean leg over the other. "I always say I'll try anything once."

I return his smile. "What about elves?"

His eyes sparkle with a mix of heat and mischief. "I thought we were talking about ice cream, Prince Vale."

My heart thumps harder. I lean forward and brush my lips over his. It's the lightest of kisses. Just

a teasing caress. “We’ve shared two out of three meals today together, Jasper. Let’s round it out with breakfast. Come home with me.”

Dark lashes brush against his smooth cheeks. Jasper’s breath mingles with mine. It’s sweet, like everything else about him. I’m dancing on the blissful edge of taking that pouty mouth right here on a park bench. But I’d rather take him to my bed.

“Okay,” he whispers into my lips.

I don’t need further encouragement.

The sky chooses that moment to crack open, lightning forking through gray clouds. Thunder booms like a cannon. Sulien jumps in our bond, hissing his displeasure at being outside.

The clouds open and rain pours down in torrents. I grab Jasper’s hand and pull him with me into a sprint, running across the park toward my place in Villette. We laugh as we run, hard rain peppering our faces. By the time we reach the stoop outside my building, we’re both soaked to the skin. Jasper’s hair is plastered to his head. Water droplets cling to his eyelashes.

“We’re here,” I say. “Let’s get you dry.”

He slants me a mischievous look. “Wet suits me just fine, Vale Gentry.”

I snort. “I bet it does, Jasper Lilygully. But I’d rather wet you with my mouth. I’m jealous of the rain right now, covering your skin. That should be me.”

His smile falls, his expression growing hungry. His heart throbs loudly in his chest. Elves—and pixies to a degree—were predatory beyond the Veil. His heartbeat is a call that pulls my dominance to the surface. Desire fills me as I wave a hand, opening my front door with magic.

Sulien darts through and disappears up the stairwell without a backward glance.

I shove Jasper through the doorway and into the wall, pressing my body to his smaller one. He’s hard, his cock a rigid length against the front of his pants. I grind my erection against his as I grip his chin. Possession screams through me at how pliable he is beneath me. How his blue eyes darken with desire.

For a heated moment, we stare at one another. Unspoken words hang heavy in the air.

My breath comes hard and fast, like I can’t pull it into my lungs quickly enough. The need to possess him in every way slams into me, battering my senses.

Surging forward, I take his mouth. I plunge my tongue inside, stroking it along his. When he groans, I suck on his tongue, then release it and drag my fangs gently over the tip.

Jasper pants into my mouth, and I angle my head so I can deepen the kiss. I kiss him like it’s the first and last time I’ll ever kiss someone. He shoves his hands under my wet shirt, caressing my stomach. I need more, I need his touch all over my naked body. And I need my mouth everywhere on him.

Growling at not being able to have everything at once, I swoop him into my arms and jog up the stairs to the second floor.

“Your neighbors,” he gasps, grabbing at my shoulders like he wants to haul me closer.

“I own the building.”

My butler, Izig, stands at the top of the stairs wearing a neutral expression. He’s stout, his dark-green skin mottled and wrinkled. Like all ogres, he’s also a fan of beautiful clothing, and he’s as dapper as ever in a three-piece suit and black bowler hat.

I set Jasper down. His wings flutter softly as he waves to Izig. “Oh hey, are you Vale’s familiar?”

He must not have noticed Sulien dash past us just now.

“Hardly,” the ogre drolls. “I am Izig, Prince Vale’s butler.”

“Fancy,” Jasper says, raising a brow at me. He returns his gaze to Izig and offers a short bow.

“Pleasure to meet you, Izig.”

Izig ignores him and turns to me with a warning look. “May I draw you a bath, sire?”

I grin when I think of Jasper in the tub, but he rises on tiptoe and speaks quietly in my ear.

“We don’t need it.” His voice dips lower. “I’m ready for anything you want to do.”

My lust cranks higher as I meet his gaze. His meaning is clear—and it’s a relief because I’m dying to get inside him. I address my butler without removing my gaze from Jasper’s. “A fire in my room would be perfect, Izig, thank you.”

Sulien stalks out of the shadows and sits next to Izig. Displeasure sparks in our bond. He’s mad about being wet, and he’s wondering what the hells I’m doing.

“Oh, a cat,” Jasper murmurs, his tone laced with displeasure.

I gesture to Sully. “This is Sulien, my familiar. He’s a Taranathen cat from beyond the Veil.”

“Mhm,” Jasper says. He sounds distracted. When he glances down at his pocket, seeming to listen to something, I realize he must be communicating with Bert. “No, of course not,” Jasper murmurs. “I’d never let that happen.”

I move closer so I can see into his pocket. Bert is barely visible, his dark eyes distinctly wary. When he catches sight of me, I offer what I hope is a reassuring smile.

“Bert, if you’d like to go with Izig, he’ll get you dried off and find you some food. And I promise Sully won’t eat you. I swear it on the sun.”

Sully growls into the bond, but I caution him. *“These are our guests. You can’t eat this mouse. Bert is Jasper’s friend.”*

“Fine,” he snaps. *“But it’s only* this *mouse I agree not to eat.”*

I turn to Jasper. “Bert will be safe. Do you trust me?”

“That’s up to Bert.” Jasper looks down at his mouse. “What do you say, old friend?”

The diminutive rodent scurries up to Jasper’s shoulder. His dark eyes narrow as he studies me. My nape prickles. For a moment, it’s like standing before my father when I was young and awaiting his judgment after some kind of reckless decision.

After a second, the mouse nods.

I release a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

Izig steps forward, his palm outstretched. In an agile move, Bert leaps from Jasper’s shoulder into my butler’s hand. Sully’s golden eyes follow every movement. He licks his lips.

“Sully…” I say through our bond.

My familiar gives me a lazy look as he rises and stalks away. *“I said I wouldn’t eat him. I never said I wouldn’t think about it.”*

Izig grunts and clutches Bert to his chest. The squat ogre straightens his bowler hat, then turns and disappears down the hall without another word.

Jasper leans toward me. “Friendly fellow. I take it the stick up his ass was placed there in your court?”

I palm his nape and pull him into me. With my free hand, I stroke his erection. “I don’t want to talk about Izig,” I growl. “I want to talk about this, and how I can take care of it for you.”

Blue eyes flash. His pink lips part. “How are you gonna take care of it, Your Highness?”

Smiling, I cup his balls through the fabric of his pants. “I’ll take care of every inch of you, Jasper Lillygully. For as long as you let me.”

His eyes drift shut as I move my hand to his dick and give him a slow stroke. “Who could say no to that offer…”

Izig appears at the edge of my vision. “Your fire is ready, Prince Vale.”

"Thank you, Izig," I say without turning my head from Jasper. "Ignore the noise, please."

He lets out an incredulous snort before disappearing down the hall, muttering under his breath.

Jasper opens his eyes, which gleam with humor and a healthy dose of that mischief I'm already addicted to. "I think your butler disapproves of me," he whispers.

"He's a little more sullen than most ogres," I whisper back. "A little too mouthy. But I love mouthy, so here we are." I rub Jasper's bottom lip with my thumb. "Speaking of mouths, I need mine on you now."

He swallows hard and rocks his hips to match the rhythmic stroke of my hand. When I pinch the tip of his cock, his blue eyes go heavy-lidded.

"I'm yours," he grits out. "Take me to bed already."

I swoop him into my arms and carry him to my bedroom, where a fireplace crackles merrily. I lower him to his feet on the soft rug before the hearth, then grab a towel from the stack Izig left on a nearby chair.

Jasper's eyes glitter in the firelight as I dry his hair. I only get halfway down his neck when he pushes my hands away and reaches for the buttons of my shirt.

He undoes each one with deft fingers, shoving the fabric open as he goes. Sunbursts of pleasure sear me from the inside out. He pulls the shirt off my shoulders, then gasps as he spies the sun tattoo that covers my left shoulder. Her rays streak across my pec and end just over my heart.

"Into symbolism much?" he asks, but there's no snark in his tone this time. He strokes the tattoo, pulling goosebumps to the surface of my skin. He looks up, his eyes hooded. "Let me see all of you, Vale. The real you."

I pull my shirt off, tossing the wet fabric aside. My pants go next. Jasper's eyes drift down my body—and spring wide at the sun tattooed around the base of my erect cock. Rays fan out in a semicircle over my lower stomach, then extend down my rigid length to the tip.

Gripping my cock, I stroke it once, a thrill shooting through me as Jasper moans softly. "The tattoo is magical," I murmur. "The sun's rays are imbued with tiny filaments of steel. I can heat them or vibrate them with my power."

"You're shitting me, right? I've never heard of such a thing."

Grinning, I grab his hand and guide it to my dick. A ragged groan falls from my lips when he closes his fingers around me and strokes. His palm is soft and warm and *gods*, he's fucking perfect.

I want to show him all of me. Every bit, every inch, every angle. I rarely drop my glamour outside of the Summer Court, but I want him to see me without it.

So I cast it away. It falls in shimmering waves that dissipate into dust and vanish into the floorboards.

Jasper gasps, dropping my cock and rocking onto his heels.

I wonder how he sees me? I'm handsome enough, but more rugged than most elves. Mahogany waves tickle my ears. The barest hint of matching beard lines my jaw. My eyes are my father's pale gold shade, my skin a burnished tan—a gift from the sun Herself. If it wasn't obvious enough which court I'm from, my skin radiates faint sunlight, the rays illuminating me from within.

Jasper's eyes rove over me. My chest swells with pride as he looks at me like he can't drink me in hard or fast enough.

My dick twitches and bobs toward my stomach. My palms itch with the need to touch my pixie, to take this attraction and toss a match on it. We're like two volatile elements, he and I. Combustible. I want to watch the chemical reaction when he ignites underneath me.

"Get those clothes off," I command. The steel in my voice has Jasper obeying, something I suspect

he's not typically accustomed to. But he rips his soaked shirt over his head and shimmies out of his pants, tossing the wet clothing aside. It hits the parquet floor with a splat, and I get my first look at my pixie—in a black thong.

My breath seizes in my lungs.

Jasper smiles.

"Damn, baby," I say in a rush, reaching for him. He laughs softly as I take him in my arms and run my hands over him greedily. His body is long and lean, his skin pale and perfect. Silver bars pierce his nipples. His chest is smooth, that hint of muscle I glimpsed under his clothes more pronounced—and so fucking sexy. Iridescent wings flutter at his back, the curved edges sifting golden dust that sparkles in the air. His erection swells the tiny thong, and his ass…

"Gods," I growl, nuzzling under his ear as I palm the taut, round globes bisected by a strip of fabric. "Your ass is a crime."

He tips his head back and gives me a sultry smile. "Wanna commit some felonies with me?"

"Fuck, yes," I breathe, sliding my hands under the straps around his hips. I nip gently at his earlobe. "I want to commit some felonies inside you."

"Yes," he says simply.

A groan rises before I can stop it. But I don't really want to. Desire rides me hard as I slide the thong down Jasper's toned thighs. I straighten and pull his hips into mine, and we both gasp as our cocks rub together. His dick is as gorgeous as the rest of him, the thick length covered in swirling veins that throb in time with his heartbeat. The head is flushed dark pink, precum beading at the tip.

"You should know something about me, Jasper," I murmur as I pull him down to the rug and guide him onto his back. I shove his thighs wide and position myself between them. I look down at his cock, then back up. "I love giving head, sweetheart. I'm going to tease you until you're begging, and then I'll tease you until you're feral. And once you're wild, I'm going to put you on your hands and knees in my bed and own that pretty ass of yours."

Jasper's nostrils flare. "You kiss your stepmother with that mouth, Gentry?"

"No." I shift forward, bracing myself with a hand on either side of his thighs. Without breaking his stare, I plant a barely-there kiss on the very tip of his cock.

Jasper's mouth falls open. His brow furrows as I let my breath coast over his dick, then he groans as I swirl my tongue over his slit, lapping at the sweet honey he leaks for me.

When I stop, his eyes narrow. "Again, Your Highness."

I close my lips around his cockhead and suck hard, hollowing my cheeks.

"Gods," he grinds out. "You're fucking good at that."

I pop off him, and he rolls his hips, chasing my mouth with his dick.

"Are all elves such teases?" he huffs, arching his back and directing his cock toward my lips.

Surging forward, I put a palm on his chest and force him flat onto his back. He hits the floor with a soft grunt that turns into a wheeze as I wrap my other fist around his length and suck him down, swallowing his cock until my nose touches his white-blond pubic hair.

He cries out and spears his fingers through my hair. His knees fall wide, and he thrusts into my mouth, grinding against my face. I suck slowly, teasing my way back down his length with soft bites and swirls of my tongue.

His skin grows flushed. A series of escalating cries fall from his lips.

I've never seen anything so hot. And I've had plenty of scorching sex.

But it was never with *him*. It was never like *this*.

I slick my tongue over his tip, then take him into my mouth and suck rhythmically until his legs

quiver. He's close. And I want to see him come. Reaching back, I fumble for a towel on the chair. My fingers brush something hard. It hits the floor and rolls into view. A bottle of lube.

Clever Izig. For all his snark and sass, he foresees my every need.

Smiling around Jasper's dick, I snap the bottle open and drip lube onto his balls. He grunts and cries out, and I deep-throat him again. Creamy precum flows from his slit, coating my tongue. He's salty-sweet and warm and he tastes like candy. It's perfect.

My cock drips sticky strings of arousal onto the carpet. Gods, I could come just watching Jasper underneath me. Slipping one hand to his sack, I cup and roll his balls, coating them with lube. Then I slide my fingers behind them, teasing the pucker of his ass with soft circular strokes.

"Beautiful," I murmur between licks.

"I know," he grits out. "I'm gorgeous, you lucky bas—"

His words die when I slide a finger into his ass, stroking in and out. He comes on a choked roar, his ass clenching around my finger. I swallow his cock, sucking down every drop of ecstasy. My name falls from his lips like a prayer, and something inside me goes tight and loose at the same time. It's a knowing, a calling, an instinct so deep and ancient it can't be denied.

He's *mine*.

I swallow every bit of cum until he's wrung dry. Then I pick him up and toss him over my shoulder. When he rears up, I swat his ass playfully. "Stay down. You're going to my bed where I can fuck you properly."

"Give me a minute." He laughs when I deposit him gently in the middle. "I'm good, Your Highness, but not quite that good."

"I take that as a challenge," I say, grabbing his thighs and flipping him onto his stomach. When he curses softly, his voice thick with lust, I chuckle and climb onto the bed. "I promise you don't want to miss this, baby," I say, leaning down to kiss my way along his muscular shoulders. He rolls and arches like a cat, his gorgeous body covered in a sheen of clean sweat. The predatory side of my nature surges through me, and I sink my fangs into the side of his neck.

Jasper grunts, but the grind of his ass against my throbbing cock tells me all I need to know—he enjoys a little pain and pleasure mixed together.

"More," he whispers. "Give me more, Vale."

I release the bite. "I want to give you everything." And I do. I want every one of his sunrises and sunsets. I want every moment, good, bad, and in between. And I want to wring bliss out of him like it's my job. His happiness is mine. Gods, I'm going to enjoy this.

Pushing his cheeks apart, I set about loosening him up. I take my time with it, stroking and teasing. Pumping one finger and then two inside him while he moans and claws at the bedding.

"Fuck," he pants, turning his head and giving me a look at his pouty lips and long lashes. "I'm ready."

"You sure?"

My pixie shoots me a warning glare over his shoulder. "Get your dick in me, Prince, or pay the consequences."

Grinning, I give his prostate another stroke before guiding my cock to his ass and dragging the tip up and down his cleft. We look perfect together, my burnished shade against his paler skin.

He rocks impatiently beneath me, a soft whine urging me to hurry.

"You gonna come for me again?" I murmur, pressing my cockhead against the tight ring of muscle.

"Gods, yes," he says on a shudder. He tosses me an impish look. "I guess I'm better than I thought."

Smiling, I bend and kiss the corner of his mouth. Then I ease back. Bracing my weight on one forearm, I thrust carefully, pushing into him one painstaking inch at a time.

Jasper grunts as I fill him. His long, elegant fingers grip the sheets tightly. He drops his head forward onto the bed.

I trail the fingers of my free hand down his spine, following the delicate vertebrae between his gossamer wings. "You okay?"

"Fucking perfect," he groans. "Keep fucking going."

Laughing softly, I press forward until I'm fully seated in his ass.

He clenches around me, sending heat tearing through my body. But if I pride myself on anything, it's my control in the bedroom. I thrust once, watching a pink flush steal across the top of his shoulders. And then I call my magic to my tattoo. The tiny metal filaments begin to heat and vibrate.

Jasper sucks in a sharp breath. He gathers his arms under him and thrusts his body backward, rocking hard onto my dick. "Fuck! Is that your tattoo?"

Collaring his throat, I pull him up to my chest and put my lips to his ear. "Yes, and it's all for you. Enjoy this, sweetheart."

"Fuck," he groans, clamping around me. "I intend to."

Bliss rockets through me, and I have to take a few deep breaths before I can speak. "You take me so godsdamned well," I rasp, thrusting into him.

"More," he says. "Give me everything."

I shove him down, and he lands on his forearms, his beautiful body so open for me. His wings spill golden dust over my bed.

"You too," I grunt, picking up the pace. "Show me more of that pretty sparkle, baby."

His response is another groan. He rocks back to meet me, his tight passage rippling around my cock.

We both moan as I grind my hips slow and hard against his perfect ass. I slip my free hand over his hip and down his stomach to grip his cock. I stroke him in time with my thrusts, squeezing his lube-slicked shaft as I thrust faster.

When his cries rise into keening wails, I go wild, hand flying over his dick with rough strokes. Every snap of my hips sends his cock through my fist. I grunt as pleasure streaks down my spine. Heat fills me. I'm barely holding back. But I need his pleasure first. I need to drive him over the edge. Gripping him hard, I jerk him fast.

He detonates, spurting cum onto my fingers. His ass clenches hard, and I can't hold back. Bliss erupts, and I come with a roar that echoes through the bedroom. Ecstasy forces my eyes shut. Galaxies burst in my mind, a riot of colors exploding behind my lids. Sound fades to nothing as release carries me on swift waves. Jasper's ass pulses around me, coaxing more cum from my throbbing cock. Every muscle tenses tight, and the world reduces to Jasper. His scent. His perfect ass clamped around my dick like a fist.

As bliss fades, I collapse on top of him, my forehead pressed to his neck. I trail kisses along his flushed skin while he pants beneath me, his back rising and falling against my beating heart. But I'm probably too heavy for him, so I roll us, tucking him against me.

His blue eyes glitter as he catches his breath. "That was… Fuck, Vale, that was incredible."

"I didn't tease you like I said I would," I growl, nosing under his chin and nibbling at his neck. "I meant to do it for hours, but you obliterated my plans, baby."

Jasper huffs a contented-sounding laugh. "I tend to do that. Just ask the syndicate lords. I think I might have actually driven Fuoco crazy."

Ah, the Lord of the Fire Syndicate.

I roll Jasper under me. “I haven’t done a good enough job if you can say another man’s name in my bed.”

He grins. “Jealous?”

I shake my head. “I’m not a jealous man. But I am possessive and determined. And I want you so satisfied, the only man on your mind is me.” I grip him under one knee and shove his thigh to his shoulder. “Show me that pretty hole I just ravished, because I want to do it again.”

Merriment—and more than a hint of challenge—dances in his eyes. “You think you have it in you?”

I sit back on my heels and stroke my hardening cock. “I absolutely do. But I’d rather have it in you.”

“Damn,” he murmurs, the merriment turning to lust. Slowly, he draws his other knee up. Cum seeps from him and slides down his cleft. “I’m all yours, Vale. Make love to me again.”

I do. We make love for hours, until he’s sated and limp. As the sky outside the window turns purple with predawn light, I tuck him into bed before donning a robe and settling in my favorite chair before the fire.

I want to keep him.

Sulien scratches at the edges of our bond, alerting me to his presence. A second later, he stalks gracefully into the room. He slinks over to me and rubs his dark cheek along my thigh, his long whiskers tickling my skin through the robe.

I stroke under his chin. *“You didn’t eat the mouse, right?”*

He replies with a warning growl. *“Of course I didn’t eat the mouse.”* He glances at the bed. *“What are you doing here, Vale?”*

“What feels right,” I respond honestly. “*I never knew he existed, Sully. I don’t think I can give him up.”*

Sully purrs softly, and like always, it’s a reassuring rumble that wraps around my heart like a warm blanket. I stroke his long pointed ears, and his purr rises in intensity.

“You’ve only got eight months until the winter solstice,” he reminds me.

I look at my bed. Jasper’s long legs are tangled in the sheets. One muscular arm is thrown over his face. The other hangs off the edge of the mattress. His white-blond hair sticks up in the front. He’s as uninhibited in sleep as he is wide awake. Everything about him makes me smile. I want to cherish him, protect him, adore him.

I return my focus to my oldest friend and confidante. *“I’ll figure something out.”*

A sorrowful look fills golden eyes that mirror mine. *“I hope you get what you want, Vale,”* Sully replies after a long pause.

“Me too,” I say aloud, returning my gaze to the beautiful pixie asleep in my bed.

CHAPTER 3

JASPER

Two weeks later

Has Paris always been this beautiful? The city glows under a buttery sun, light sparkling over a nearby fountain.

Or maybe it's just the man next to me. Vale and I walk side by side, our fingers brushing as we make our way through an open-air market. He catches my eye and winks. The sun appears to wink, too, the market dimming for an instant. I peer at the sky, trying to figure out if I'm losing my mind. Then I glance at Vale, who does a poor job of hiding his smile as he steps around a basket overflowing with bouquets of flowers.

Pride and lust flare in my chest. My man is powerful. Something tells me he's only shown me a glimpse of his abilities. But he's not a snob. Arrogant, sure, but who wouldn't be? Besides, he wears it so well. When he returns my gaze at last, that cocky little smile spreads to his eyes, which gleam with promise I've quickly learned to decipher.

He wants me. Right on cue, my dick tightens.

"Stop it," I say, giving him a meaningful look.

All innocence, he raises his eyebrows. "What?"

Glancing at a knot of passing humans, I lean into him and lower my voice. "Looking at me like you want to get me all dirty."

His rich laugh rumbles down my side as he wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me against him. His glamour is dialed all the way up, but more than one human stares as we pass. He ignores them, his gaze on me as he slides his big hand down to my ass. "I don't want to get you dirty, baby," he murmurs.

"No?" I let disappointment lace my tone. This is a familiar game—pretending we aren't a couple of horny motherfuckers. Neither of us can pretend for long.

"Jamais," he says. Never. He stops us right in the middle of the market. Humans stream past us like water diverting around a boulder in a river. The promise in Vale's eyes gleams brighter as he bends his head to my ear. "I want to get you absolutely filthy. I want to be in your pores, Jasper Lilygully. In your blood and on your skin. No matter how hard you scrub, you're never going to get me off you."

A colony of fairy sprites takes up residence in my stomach. Heat sears me, blazing a fiery path to my dick. For a second, I consider playing it cool. But who am I kidding? I've never been cool around

this prince. For the past two weeks, things between us have been one temperature only. Hot.

"Well, when you put it that way," I say breathlessly.

Vale eases back, a mix of humor and desire in his golden eyes. "You want ice cream?"

I almost burst out laughing. "I've never met anyone who loves ice cream as much as you." At first, I thought he was just treating me. Now I know Vale will use any excuse to eat ice cream. His favorite is chocolate chip. Abruptly, I realize I've known that for a while, just like I know he's a blanket hog and that he never picks up his towel after he showers. The second time I tripped over it, I snapped the wet length across his ass as he shaved—and promptly ended up flat on my back on his bed with a naked Summer prince between my legs. He put his tattoo to good use that morning, edging me with heat and light until I pleaded for mercy.

He shrugs now, looking boyish and so fucking hot I want to climb him. "I like sweet things."

"Don't you dare call me sweet."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he says with a smile. Then he takes my hand and tugs me back into the flow of the crowd. We get about a dozen steps when he leans close and adds, "But that sugary hole of yours tastes sweeter than any ice cream."

Bert makes a disgruntled sound in my head as Vale and I move toward the Arc de Triomphe. *"Does Prince Charming realize I can hear him?"*

I tip my chin down and meet Bert's dark eyes. *"You know, you don't have to come out with us. You can stay back at the house."*

"With that demon cat? No, thank you."

"Sulien isn't a demon. He's an elvish cat. And I don't think he ventures far from Vale's side." I glance around, but there's no sign of the waist-high feline. Of course, that doesn't mean he's absent. Taranathen cats are stealthy creatures. Despite their size, they find ways to remain unseen. And the cat is clearly devoted to Vale. On nights when Vale and I hit the town, it's not unusual for me to catch glimpses of black fur and a long tail out of the corner of my eye.

"Did Sulien come with you through the Veil?" I ask Vale now.

Vale nods, smiling. "Yes, he's been with me since childhood. Most elves bond with their familiars quite young." Vale's eyes turn the color of honey as his smile goes fond. "Sully passed up three of my cousins to claim me. And when a Taranathen cat declares you his, well, that's that."

"Sully?" Bert grumbles in my head.

"I think it's cute," I tell him, returning Vale's smile.

"Yeah, you get stupid when you're in love."

I suck in a breath. *"I'm not in love."* Am I?

"Yeah, right." Bert burrows more deeply into my pocket. Even without looking, I know he's curled up for a nap.

Vale tips his head back and gazes up at the soaring arch, which bristles with mushrooms. Vines trail from the top, where a large wooden house sprawls, its chimney belching smoke into the sky. Vale studies it for a moment, then looks down at me and smiles. "This place looked a lot different without a troll living on top of it."

I tilt my head. "How so?"

He returns his gaze to the arch, and his eyes grow distant like he's remembering. "Well, it was cleaner, for one thing. Bright white and surrounded by streets shooting from all directions instead of the labyrinth you see now. Back then, humans called it Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile because the boulevards radiated outward like a star." Vale's chest lifts in a sigh, and his voice goes wistful. "The city was…alive. It's full of magic now, but it had its own kind of magic before the Veil fell." His

expression turns melancholy as he gazes at me. “I wish you could see it the way I remember it.”

“Show me,” I say on impulse. “Take me around the city. Let me see it through your eyes.”

Vale’s face lights up, and he takes my hand. “Let’s go.”

We spend the rest of the day exploring Paris. Vale takes me to all the special places he loves—the backstreets that conceal traces of the city’s ancient walls, the hidden gardens that smell of roses and jasmine, and the overlook high above Notre Dame where we can see all of Paris sprawled out below us. At each stop, he shares stories about how things were before the Veil came down—the cobblestone streets lined with shops, carriages pulled by horses instead of griffins, and a thriving business district instead of the crumbling office buildings of La Défense.

At 427 years old, he’s young for an elf, but he speaks of an era I can only imagine, when humans wore powdered wigs and physicians believed illness was caused by bad humors in the blood. In those days, the Veil was thick, and elves lived in the vast forests of the Myth, their courts places of mystery and wonder.

“Do you miss it?” I ask quietly. “Your life behind the Veil?”

He stops next to a fountain where a street artist paints pictures of ducks swimming in a nearby pond. His expression turns thoughtful, and he takes a moment to answer. “I don’t long for it—not like my father does. But he lived beyond the Veil for thousands of years. The Summer Court covered the whole Taranathen Forest. To hear him tell it, the magic was so strong there, even he feared its displeasure.” Vale offers a sad smile. “I pity the ancients who were forced to abandon their world. It has to be difficult for them to adjust. To find meaning and beauty on this plane. I’m fortunate to have found both of those things.”

Warmth tingles over my skin. It’s obvious he means me. *I’m* the meaning and beauty he found. Sounds intrude—the splash of the fountain and the artist’s scratchy brush strokes on the canvas—but they’re nothing compared to the *thump thump* of my heart.

Am I in love? Is this what it feels like? I thought I knew. But I’ve never felt like this, like the ground beneath my feet is unsteady. I wait for some snappy comeback to appear in my mind. With anyone else, I’d flirt or deflect, tossing out a carefree remark like stones skipping over still water. But nothing surfaces. With this man, I’m out of my depth. I’m drowning a little, lost in a pair of eyes like honey.

Vale draws a deep breath. “Jasper—”

A bicycle bell splits the air. Vale jerks me out of the path of a cyclist who speeds past us, tossing a string of rapid-fire French over his shoulder.

Vale lifts his voice, shouting back at the man in the same language. Vale shakes his fist, his bellow so loud the ducks burst from the pond in a cacophony of honks and flapping wings.

“What did he say?” I ask, mirth bubbling.

Vale slants me a roguish look. “He told you to move your ass. I told him I’d shove his bicycle up his.”

My laughter spills over. “You should have let me hex him.”

“No,” Vale says simply, tucking my arm in his elbow and pulling me into a stroll. “Anyone who wants to fuck with you has to get through me first. And trust me, baby, they’re not getting through me.”

Pleasure unfurls in my chest. Maybe I should push back on his macho posturing. I’m no prizefighter, but I’m capable of taking care of myself. On the other hand, it’s hot as fuck watching him ready to throw down over me. Bonus points that he did it in his flawless French.

We move through the streets, sampling food from stalls and stopping to sniff bouquets wrapped in brightly colored paper. At one cart, he buys me a brilliant blue flower and murmurs in French as he

tucks it behind my ear.

"What does that mean?" I ask, my heart thumping again.

"The same color as your eyes."

The cobblestone streets grow rougher, the buildings older. Creatures from the darkest corners of the Myth brush past us. I shiver as a male with bubbling skin and a face full of bulging eyes approaches and then steps around me at the last minute.

"What is it?" Vale asks, slowing and stroking his knuckles over my cheek.

"Nothing." I glance over my shoulder as the male moves away. "I've just never seen one like him."

Vale's eyebrows go up in apparent surprise. "You saw under his glamour?"

Smugness spreads through me. I smooth my hair and make my tone airy. "I'm better than most at seeing under glamour."

His smile is slow and full of delight. "Is that so?"

"Mmm." I flutter my wings and rake my gaze down his body. "One of my many, *many* gifts."

Vale laughs as he takes my hand and tugs me forward. "Come on, gifted one." He tips his head toward mine and lowers his voice. "Before you make me so hard I can't walk."

We stroll down streets so ancient they've been named and renamed and renamed again. Vale points out various landmarks, noting how magic has changed them, wearing away the technology and warping human progress. But magic hasn't conquered everything. Lacing his fingers through mine, Vale pulls me into a cathedral with gorgeous stained glass windows. Incense wafts in the air, and great shafts of multi-colored light slant across ancient floors. A brass plaque on the wall proudly proclaims the building is in its "original form since 1395."

"It's because so many of these places were built on top of pagan sites," Vale explains. "Before they discovered all their tech, humans believed in magic." His lips quirk in a sexy smile as he leads me down the side aisle of a shadowy cathedral. "Some of them even worshipped us."

"I bet you loved that," I murmur.

His eyes glint in the glow of the candles that cover a nearby altar. "I don't mind a certain type of man kneeling at my feet."

Instantly, my body burns as hot as the candles. I glance at the statue of a saint that looms over us. "Careful. You'll get us struck by lightning."

His low laugh echoes down the rows of empty pews. "Let's get out of here. I'm starving."

I heave a put-upon sigh. "You always are."

"Mmm." He tucks my arm through his and dips his head to nip at my ear. "Insatiable."

Dusk smears the sky in purples and reds as we emerge from the church. We end up on Rue Saint-Dominique, where Vale buys us croissants stuffed with warm, bittersweet chocolate that feels lighter than air on my tongue.

"Gods, I love these," I groan.

Vale smiles. "I know."

"You do?"

Heat flares in his eyes. "I pay attention, especially when it's something important."

Just like that, my dick goes hard. That "something important" is me. The Prince of the Summer Court pays attention to what I like to eat. It shouldn't be sexy, but it is. It might be the sexiest thing about him.

We eat right there in the street, laughing and swiping smears of chocolate from each other's mouths.

Halfway through our feast, Bert rouses and pops his head above my pocket. At the same moment, a trio of mice scamper around the corner of a nearby building.

"That's my crew," Bert says in my head.

I almost choke on a piece of croissant. "Did you just say crew?" I ask aloud, laughter warbling in my throat. When Bert's expression darkens, I switch to telepathy. *"I'm sorry, are you robbing a bank tonight?"*

"No, asshole," he says, jumping from my pocket and shooting down my leg to the ground. He hurries across the street, then stops and gives me a dirty look over his shoulder. *"I'm giving you some privacy. Not that you deserve it."*

One of the mice on the corner chirps, its tail swishing.

I offer Bert a short bow and soften my tone in my head. *"Thanks."*

"Hmph." With a final withering look, he scampers off. Together, he and the other mice disappear into the shadows.

When I look at Vale, he stares at the corner with a bemused smile. "Your mouse knows Parisian mice?"

"No idea," I say, smiling. "I think all mice know each other everywhere, to be honest. Bert, Mert, and Luke seem to find friends no matter where we go."

Vale blinks. "You have other mice?"

"Oh yeah. Plus a few pigeons and a couple of chipmunks. But the others don't enjoy traveling. Mert suffers from terrible motion sickness, and Luke gets homesick, so—" I clamp my mouth shut as Vale's face splits in a grin. "What?"

"What?"

"You're smiling at me."

"Well, you're fucking adorable. Of course I'm smiling at you."

I flick the crumbs from my croissant at him. "We'll see how adorable I am when you want your dick sucked later."

At that, he throws his head back and laughs. Then he pulls me against him and kisses me, his mouth as warm and sinful as the chocolate. When I'm breathless and hard as stone, he pulls back.

"I have something else I want to show you. Are you up for one last stop?"

I'm up for anything as long as you're there.

"Yes," I say breathlessly. "Lead the way."

As night falls, the city's energy changes. Paris sheds its daytime skin and slips into something darker and more sensual. Golden eyes glittering with desire, Vale pulls me down a narrow path lined with flickering gas lamps. Tangled trees soar above us, the trunks far too thick and broad to be completely natural. No, this is an old-growth forest fueled by magic.

Out of nowhere, an ache bolts across my left wing. It's so unexpected, I suck in a breath.

Vale stops, his expression instantly alert. "You okay, baby?"

"I'm fine," I say, waving it off. Wherever he's taking me, I want to go. I squeeze his hand. "Too many croissants."

"Aww." Chuckling, he tucks me against him as we continue up the path. "It's true. We've pretty much eaten our way through the city over the past two weeks."

"Yeah, but we've burned off the calories." On the last word, another ache shoots across my wing. This time, I bite my tongue. For the love of Puck, what is wrong with me? I grit my teeth and ignore the pain.

But a few steps later, lightning strikes and I double over. Nausea roils my gut. The forest dims as

a cold sweat covers my skin.

"Jasper!" Vale wraps an arm around my back. "What is it—" He inhales sharply, then he groans. "Gods, I am *such* a fool."

For a second, I think he means he's a fool for being with me. But then he sweeps me into his arms and strides down the path, rapidly retracing our steps.

"I'm sorry, baby," he says, his eyes contrite in his determined face. "I always forget how iron affects the young among us."

"Iron?" I rasp, the nausea receding.

"The Eiffel Tower. I wanted to show you the flowers that climb up the pillars." He hefts me higher in his arms and drops a quick kiss on my clammy forehead. "But we can still see it from across the river."

A moment later, he settles me on a park bench on the edge of the Seine. The twisted Eiffel Tower glitters across the water, its mangled arches contorted into loops and knots. Lights wind up the pillars, the bulbs fighting a losing battle against the riot of wildflowers and fat roses that crawl over the metal.

"Feeling better?" Vale asks, watching me closely. He takes my hand and rests our laced fingers on his thigh.

"Yeah." I tip my head toward the tower. "The iron really doesn't bother you?"

He shakes his head.

"Has it ever bothered you? When you were a young elf mixing it up during the Renaissance?"

He hesitates. "Not really."

Disquiet moves through me. But I shake it off and give him a saucy wink. "And now you're slumming it with me, Your Highness."

Vale stiffens. "Don't say that." Pain moves through his eyes, and his tone turns serious. "Don't belittle yourself like that. Please."

The disquiet makes another unsettling trip down my spine. "All right."

Silence stretches. Vale holds my gaze, a little frown forming between his brows. "Jasper…"

My heart stutters. *Oh no.* He's going to break it off. He's going to dump me right here on this park bench, and it's going to hurt so bad.

"There's something I need to tell you," he says.

Blood rushes in my ears. I brace myself for the inevitable. What was I thinking, hooking up with an elven prince? Bert warned me. He fucking warned me. And now Vale is going to crush my heart under his expensive boot.

He draws an uneven breath. "I don't know how to say this…"

"Just say it," I snap, tugging my hand from his. Gods, my palms are sweating. How embarrassing.

I stand, prepared to flee so I don't have to see his face when he attempts to let me down easy.

"No." In one movement, Vale jumps to his feet, seizes my hand, and yanks me into a kiss. And not just any kiss. He *devours* me, cupping my face in his hands and stroking his tongue boldly against mine. He growls, the possessive sound rumbling into my mouth and straight down to my cock, which throbs for him. Only him. His hot, perfect mouth and the pressure of his strong fingers on my jaw. His dick pressed hard against mine. I swim in his scent—sunshine and fresh-cut grass and *summer*. Vale Gentry smells like summer, and I want to bask in him forever.

When he breaks off the kiss, we lean our foreheads together, both of us panting. My vision fills with golden eyes and dark stubble and a pink, wet mouth that murmurs my name over and over. "Jasper… Jasper. I love you."

I jerk my head up, my heart pounding overtime. Triple time. "What did you say?" Because I couldn't have heard him correctly.

"I love you," he says, his voice hoarse. "I know we've only been together a short while, but I feel…" He swallows thickly. "I've never felt this way about anyone. Ever." Something fierce flashes in his eyes, and his glamour ripples, giving me a glimpse of the sun-god concealed under his more mundane wrapping. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep you. To keep us." The fierceness fades, replaced with uncharacteristic doubt. He searches my face, his mouth swollen from our kiss. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," I breathe, disbelief and joy trembling inside me. "I've been afraid to say it. But yes, I want that. I love you, Vale."

He palms the back of my neck, the joy in his face mirroring the throb of emotion in my chest. "I love you."

I give a shaky laugh. "You said that already."

"I never want to stop saying it."

The joy inside me softens, melting into something sweeter. "Then don't," I say, twining my arms around his neck. "Keep saying it, my prince, because I love hearing it." I rise on tiptoe and nip his jaw. "And I'd *really* love it if you take me home and fuck me."

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, WE STUMBLE INTO VALE'S BEDROOM, LAUGHING AND KISSING AND RIPPING AT each other's clothes. Vale yanks my shirt off, sending buttons pinging across the hardwood as he backs me to the bed. When my hips hit the edge, he grabs me around the thighs and tosses me onto the mattress. My pants and underwear disappear in two quick yanks, then he stands back and groans.

"Fuck, baby, you're so fucking hot."

"And you're wearing too many clothes," I say, rolling my hips. Planting my feet flat on the mattress, I spread my legs wide.

He bites his lip, his breathing hitching as he strips. His warm, golden eyes rove my body, landing on my cock, which leaks all over my stomach. "Stroke yourself. Show me how you like to be touched. And drop the glamour."

I raise an eyebrow, but I wrap my hand around my shaft and start pumping. "So fucking bossy, Your Highness."

His lips curve in an arrogant smile as he grasps his own dick. "Drop the glamour, pixie. Show me those pretty wings and hot little hole."

"F-Fuck," I gasp, lust spiking. I obey, letting my glamour roll away so my wings spread under me. At the edge of my vision, the tips glow bright gold. I increase the pace of my strokes, jerking my dick under his watchful gaze.

Vale climbs onto the bed and settles between my spread thighs. He strokes a slow, reverent hand down the edge of my wing. "So beautiful. Do you control the color?"

"Sometimes." My strokes on my dick falter as raw, undiluted pleasure courses from my wing to my groin. "Oh fuck… I— Our wings mirror our emotions most of the time. We get better at controlling them with age. Among pixies, changing the color of the dust can be a form of honoring someone—or insulting them."

Vale rumbles a soft laugh. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Just keep fucking touching me, and we won't have a problem."

Another laugh, and he pushes my knees higher, opening me to his gaze. "Now who's bossy?" Batting my hand away, he takes over stroking my dick.

Pleasure lashes me, bowing my spine and pulling broken, desperate sounds from my throat. He drops his glamour, too, filling the room with light and heat as he pumps his big fist up and down my shaft. Precum beads at my slit, and he leans over and sucks it away, his honey-colored eyes locked with mine.

"Give me more," he orders softly, squeezing me. "Mmm, good boy." He sucks my cockhead into his mouth, pulsing his lips around my tip and hollowing his cheeks. He does this for several long moments, waiting patiently for precum to form at my slit before licking it away, his pink tongue wetting my tip until it glistens.

"Vale," I pant, rocking my hips up. Pleading for more with my body. I grab at the sheets, my whimpers growing more desperate in my ears. "Vale… Gods, I love you."

He pulls off my dick, the glow around him growing as bright as a halo. His ears taper to points as his glamour slides away completely. He lowers himself onto me, giving me his full weight as he strokes one golden hand over my cheek. "I love you, too, baby. *So* much." He drops kisses all over my face—tender, light touches on my forehead, my eyelid, the curve of my eyebrow. And he rocks his hips, grinding his erection into mine. We leak together, our bellies growing slick with desire.

"I could come like this," I groan, clinging to his shoulders and rolling my hips. The sounds we make are filthy—wet, fleshy friction. Hot, hard skin against hot, hard skin. My trimmed pubes grow damp from our mingled precum, and I rock harder, eager for more. Ready to be marked and claimed by my summer prince.

"I want you on top," Vale says suddenly. "I want you to ride me."

"Then flip the fuck over, cowboy."

Laughing, he gets us into position, his back propped against the pillows with me astride him. Eyes twinkling, he pulls a bottle of lube from under the pillow.

"Confident you were getting lucky tonight, huh?" I demand, swiping it from him.

He bucks his hips once, the twinkle in his eyes brighter than the stars over Paris. "I had a feeling."

I try to look exasperated, but I know I fail as I slather lube all over his dick. Then I settle over it, letting the thick length nestle between my cheeks. Palms on his golden chest, I roll my hips in a slow, sensual grind. As his cock drags up and down my hole, we both groan.

"You're so hard," he says, giving my straining dick a firm caress that makes me jump.

"I could say the same for—oh gods—you." My wings bat the air lazily as I work the furrow of my ass up and down and all over his length. His body is a work of art beneath me, every sculpted muscle and graceful, golden line more beautiful than anything he showed me in the city. His tattoo glows, sunlight gleaming along the delicate lines etched into his skin.

Bending, I kiss his chest before sucking a flat, pink nipple into my mouth. His delicious scent fills my lungs, and his summery taste explodes on my tongue. Groaning, I move to the other nipple, flicking and teasing while I rub my quivering hole up and down his dick. He trembles under me—a continent shivering and threatening to split apart.

"Baby," he gasps, squeezing my hips. "Baby… Fuck, yes. So good for me." He pumps his hips, thrusting against my ass. Then he reaches around me and slaps his dick against my cleft, the smack loud and obscene.

"Fuck," I whimper, biting at the round muscle of his pecs. I trail my tongue down the valley between them and sit up, rocking wantonly on his cock.

“Let's get you ready,” he murmurs, slipping a hand under me and stroking my hole.

I squirm and moan, losing myself in the feel of his fingers playing around my rim. His skin is callused, the pads of his fingers rough and hard. Odd for someone of his station. Somewhere in my brain, curiosity forms and then flits away. Because his touch feels too good for questions. When he pushes a long finger inside me, I toss my head back and moan.

“There you go,” he growls. “Open up for me, honey.”

“Yeah,” I gasp, rocking as he finger-fucks me. “So good.”

“No, not good, baby. Amazing.” He crooks his finger and hits my sweet spot, sending waves of pure pleasure through my body. My cock bobs wildly, slapping his stomach as I ride his finger, wanting more. Wanting to come all over him. Wanting him to fuck me so hard I feel it tomorrow.

He groans, pushing deeper and rubbing my gland. “Ready for more?”

“Please,” I beg, squirming and writhing on his finger. He uses his other hand to torment me, playing with my balls, the base of my cock, my cockhead. He pinches my tip, swiping more precum from the slit and sucking it from his thumb. “Oh fuck,” I whimper.

He carries my precum to my cleft, smearing it around my hole he’s still fingering. Then he pulls my cheek wide and pushes two fingers inside. “You’re so tight, baby. So fucking hot and tight. You think you can take my big dick? Because I want inside here so, so bad.”

“Gods…” I thrash, back arching as my ass clenches around his finger. “Yes. I want it. I can take it.”

He knows, of course, and he pushes another long finger inside. “You’re so beautiful,” he says as I moan. “So open for me. Fuck, Jasper. So damn good. That’s it, baby. Squeeze me. Show me how much you want it.”

Moaning, I oblige him, clamping hard around his fingers. The bedroom fills with our ragged moans and the wet squelch of his fingers pumping into me. Loosening me up. Getting me nice and juicy.

He sits up with me clinging to him, and he kisses me as we rock together. Neither of us are willing to break it off, so we bite at each other’s lips as he lines his cock up with my entrance. When he pushes past the tight ring of muscle, I gasp against his mouth. And when he thrusts deep, I suck at his tongue and sink down until he fills me completely, his balls snug against my ass.

“You’re so fucking amazing,” he whispers, his dick throbbing inside me. He smooths his palms up my sides, his big hands bumping over my ribs. “You feel incredible.”

“Fuck me,” I whisper back. “Make me yours, my prince.”

He lifts his head, his eyes gleaming with lust and love. “I love you so damn much, Jasper.”

Tears burn my throat. “I love you, too.”

“I love you,” he murmurs, as if he can’t stop himself from saying it. And he says it again as he begins to move, thrusting up and up. Pumping his dick into me—slow and easy at first and then harder and faster.

“Vale,” I gasp, gripping his shoulders. Digging my fingers into the muscle. My wings flutter wildly, sending gusts of air around the bed. “It’s so good.”

“Yeah?” he demands, his eyes glittering. “You like this dick?”

“Yes. I love it.”

“Want more?” He bounces me harder. “Your greedy hole can’t get enough, can it?”

“No,” I say, panting as I ride him like a jockey. “Give me everything. Fuck me hard.”

“My baby gets what he wants.” He picks up speed, thrusting hard and fast, driving his cock into me in a relentless rhythm. “So good,” he rumbles, his thick shoulder muscles flexing under my hands.

Our gazes hold, and it's like looking into the sun. Golden, beautiful, all-consuming. I can't even blink as he thrusts into me, his cock hitting my spot every time. "I'm close," I whisper, my voice shaking. "I'm so close."

"Come for me, baby," he grunts, moving a hand to my dick. He strokes me as keeps up that maddening rhythm, fucking me hard and deep. Bouncing me on his lap, his balls slapping against my ass as his hand works my dick.

I'm lost. There's no part of me that doesn't belong to the sun prince. Heart and soul. Inside and out. My orgasm slams into me, and I spurt over his stomach and chest, cum spraying from my cock as I scream Vale's name.

He roars and thrusts a final time. Squeezes my hip hard and pumps his release deep inside my ass. Hot cum sears my passage, filling me up.

We cry out as we come together, and then I collapse on top of him with his pulsing dick still lodged inside me. He wraps his arms around me and presses his lips to my sweaty temple.

"Fuck, baby," he says, his heart pounding against mine. "You okay? Did I hurt you?"

I reach up and clumsily pat his jaw. "You could never hurt me," I murmur, my words slurring. Gods, he fucked me so hard I'm drunk.

His arms tighten around me. His breath shudders out, ruffling my hair. "You're mine. Tell me you're mine."

Something in his voice makes me push against his hold until he loosens his arms. I pull back so I can see his face, and I catch the worry he tries to blink away. "Hey," I say softly, stroking his stubble-covered jaw as I catch my breath. "I'm yours, Vale Gentry. Only yours. I don't give my love away lightly, my prince."

He cups my jaw, his roughened thumb brushing over my cheekbone. "I'm so glad I bumped into you in Mab's court."

Relief washes over me, and I laugh as I press a kiss to his lips. "You're lucky I didn't hex you."

"You can hex me anytime. Do whatever you want to me."

"I'll remember that." Smiling, I kiss the corner of his mouth before snuggling against him and stroking my fingers through his golden chest hair. "Pixies have long memories, Your Highness. We never forget a slight."

"Mmm." He returns my kisses, his arms tightening around me once more. "Then I'll have to work hard to stay in your good graces."

"Keep that dick in working order and you'll do just fine."

We cuddle in the ruined bed, sheets tangled around our legs. And we fall asleep wrapped in each other, smiles on our faces.

When I wake much later, predawn light streams through the windows. Vale is gone, a scribbled note in his place.

Went out for croissants (and maybe ice cream). Sleep in, mon amour, I'll return shortly.

Grinning like an idiot, I collapse onto my back with the note pressed to my heart. *Mon amour.* He called me his love in the language of love. Bert is going to puke when he hears it.

My grin spreads as I tune my senses to the sprawling house. The brownstone is silent. No doubt, Izig and Sulien went with Vale. But they'll come back soon, and I know exactly how to start the day

with my summer prince.

Smile in place, I let myself doze, content to wait for Vale's return.

CHAPTER 4

VALE

I clutch a bouquet of golden-yellow roses in my hand as Izig and I cross the street. Normally yellow flowers are a sign of friendship, but I know Jasper will see this for what it is—the prince of the Summer Court is his. And he's mine. The last two weeks together have been utter bliss. Even old Izig is coming around. He's smiled more in the two weeks Jasper's been with me than he has in the two hundred years he's served as my butler.

I'm sharing an important secret with Jasper tonight. I suspect he'll be upset, but then he'll demand a kiss and a pastry and I'll lavish my love on him until he passes out. That's how we work—he brings the joy and I spoil him every chance I get.

Grinning, I step onto the sidewalk and look in the window of my favorite boulangerie. Jasper's obsessed with their chocolate-filled croissants. Dozens of other options sit in piles atop display stands. Izig stops next to me and crosses his arms as he peers in the window.

"The dark chocolate," Sulien purrs in my mind, appearing from a dark alleyway and moving toward me. *"It's Jasper's favorite. But maybe add a spicy chocolate croissant for Izig. He doesn't want to ask you, but he grumbled when you came home without one last time."*

"They were sold out," I return, glancing down as Sully sits by my side. *"What about you? Do you want anything?"*

He prowls forward and rears up, planting both front paws delicately against the glass window. Izig stares longingly at the pastries. Ogres are prickly about gifts. He won't outright ask me to buy him a pastry, but—

Movement draws my eyes up. I stiffen. Reflected in the window behind me stand three elven guards decked out in the red and gold of my father's court. The lead guard moves his hands to the hilt of a jagged dagger strapped to his thigh. The guards' glamours keep them hidden from the human world. To passersby, we'll simply look like a man, an ogre, and a cat surrounded by three ordinary frenchmen.

Sully yowls and steps in front of me, sitting protectively at my feet.

One of the three guards wears a captain's patch. I struggle not to sneer as I stare at it. The guard used to serve my father, but he gifted them to Zaphira when they married. They're on her payroll now, and they do her bidding above all else.

The captain gives me a snide look. "Your stepmother requires your presence, Prince. She'd like to discuss the wedding preparations."

I return the disdainful expression. "I don't think so."

He sucks at his teeth, lips splitting into an evil grin at odds with his noble features. "Queen Zaphira thought you might say that. Let me be clear. You return home, or the pretty pixie dies."

My mouth goes dry as a desert. How could she know about Jasper? How is she always one godsdamned step ahead of me? Will there never be a day she doesn't pull my strings as if I'm her personal puppet?

"You seem disinclined to obey," the guard snipes. "Let me make this more clear. Usually, there are four of us. Our companion is outside your brownstone as we speak, ready to do the queen's bidding if you don't come along nicely."

Sulien growls loudly. Izig steps to my side and lifts his chin defiantly.

Jasper. They can't get to him. I can't allow it. I'll never allow it.

And that's how I know I'll go to Zaphira. Because I can't risk the man I love. Not for anything.

A glittering golden carriage, glamoured to look like a decrepit old wagon, pulls up behind the elves. Horses from the Winter Court stop, the sleigh bells on their harnesses jingling. The beasts snort, and cold air puffs from their nostrils in little white clouds.

The captain goes to the carriage and opens the door. "After you, Prince." He says my title with a sneer, but I don't bother to correct his behavior. One day when I replace my father, I'll bury this male in a deep, dark hole. It's like I told Jasper the day we met—I'm a patient man. I play the long game.

I stop next to the guard, memorizing his dull brown eyes and scarred cheek.

"What're you doing?" he barks.

"Remembering who you are," I say quietly. "I don't forget a face. I'll remember yours."

He pales. Then he grips my arm and shoves me toward the open door. "Get in or I'll put you in."

I step into the carriage and sink into the plush leather seat. Sully darts through the door and sits rigidly beside me. The captain grabs Izig by the collar and tosses him in next to me. Izig's head strikes the back of the seat, knocking his bowler hat to the floor. As Izig rights himself, I scoop up the hat. One side is crushed, the felt misshapen.

The guard smiles. "That's a shame. You should have been more careful."

My butler snarls, baring his sharp fangs.

"Easy, old friend," I caution.

The captain of the guard smirks, then slams the door shut. A second later, the carriage starts to roll.

I pop the dent out of Izig's hat and hand it to him. There's still a slight wrinkle to the fabric.

"I'll replace it," I say softly.

"It's fine," he huffs.

"He's embarrassed," Sully says in my mind. *"He couldn't protect you."*

"I know." I couldn't protect Izig, either. I can only hope I protected Jasper.

The three of us fall silent as Paris passes outside the window.

An hour later, we pull through ornate steel gates and down a crushed gravel drive toward my father's manor outside of Paris. He owns houses and condos in most major cities, but the manor in Fourneclaire is Zaphira's favorite. I hate coming here. The sand-colored brick and pale blue shutters appear pleasant enough, but the reality couldn't be farther from the truth.

The manor at Fourneclaire is twenty-thousand feet of frigid, cruel cold.

The carriage stops in the half-circle drive. No one meets us, of course. Zaphira loves to remind me how little she cares for me when Father isn't around.

Izig, Sully, and I exit the carriage and follow broad stone steps to the lavish double doors. Icy tendrils of cold burrow under my collar and slide down my spine. Zaphira's Winter Court magic is strong here. It'll be freezing inside—a toxic, frozen wonderland she rules with a heavy fist.

"I hate this place," Izig mutters. Sully rumbles his agreement.

As we pause before the doors, I look down at my oldest friends. “I promise I’ll find a way out of this for all of us. Do you trust me?”

Two sets of eyes peer up at me. Izig dips his head in a brusque nod, then returns his gaze to the doors. Sully caresses our bond softly, his way of showing support. I stroke it back, grateful for his partnership.

I grip an ornate carved snowflake door handle—something Zaphira added when she moved here from my father’s townhouse in the city—and push the doors open. An icy blast blows my hair back, the freezing air pulling goosebumps to the surface of my skin.

“Seems like she’s turned the cold up,” Izig grunts.

“Always.” I clamp my mouth shut. Zaphira has spies everywhere. The less we say in her house the better. I lead us through a short hall that opens into an enormous foyer. On the far side of the space, dual curved staircases lead to the second floor.

A hiss echoes across the marble floor, followed by the slither of rough scales. A snake-like head pokes through an open door to our right. Zaphira’s basilisk familiar. Twin rows of spines rise from his forehead and point backward down his long body. They flare upright as he swishes the tip of his tail toward us. It’s split into three dangerous spikes he can use to protect himself.

Or Zaphira.

“Hello, Ybris,” I say.

Glacier-blue eyes narrow at me. The beast’s black tongue darts out to taste the air. Dozens of conical teeth drip venom onto the checkerboard marble.

Beside me, Sully shudders.

“Easy,” I reassure him through our bond. *“You’re safe.”*

“This time,” he grunts back.

With a jerk of his long snout, Ybris demands we follow.

I keep my shoulders back as I cross the foyer. I refuse to huddle against the cold. That’s exactly what Zaphira wants, for me to be uncomfortable and out-of-sorts. I stride through the open door as Ybris side-winds across the room.

The dining room is empty save for a glossy pale blue desk in front of a now-covered window. Sun used to beam through the glass, but it’s hidden away by velvet drapes. A wingback chair sits in front of a fireplace crackling with blue flames—cold fire Zaphira brought from her court as a “reminder of home.”

Ybris curls his long body around the chair’s legs, his tongue flicking out as he hisses. I can’t see Zaphira with the chair turned away, but her menacing presence reaches across the room, her icy wrath wrapping around me like invisible tentacles.

As I clench my teeth against the onslaught, her hand appears on the chair’s arm. Long, navy-colored nails thump rhythmically against the blue velvet.

I clear my throat. “You summoned me, Stepmother?”

Her fingers stop moving. A loud sigh echoes across the freezing room before she stands and faces me.

Her beauty is as timeless as ever, her black waves pinned into an elegant updo and her icy blue eyes glittering in the room’s freezing air. Blue diamonds drip from her pointed ears. My stepmother never hides behind glamour. Always, she shows exactly who she is—the frigid Princess of the Winter Court.

She wears a fitted ivory dress that accentuates her bust and flares over rounded hips. Even with the distance between us, the snowflake pattern embroidered on the fabric glitters like ice. The only

sign that she's now part of King Nylian's court is a small metal sun pinned to her left breast. Not that he even knows. I haven't seen my father and Zaphira together in nearly fifty years.

She folds her hands at her waist. "Abelin. I hope you enjoyed your little dalliance in Paris." Her tone is light, but there's an unmistakable threat underneath it.

"It's not a dalliance," I say. "I'm in love, Zaphira. Jasper is my mate."

She laughs, and it's as brittle and harsh as the rest of her. As quickly as it comes, her laughter dies. Her wicked smile disappears as she walks toward me. "I don't care if he's the sun in elf form. You have responsibilities to this court."

I move forward, meeting her halfway across the room. "We don't have to continue doing things by the old ways. Mab invited us for a formal dinner in her court for the first time in elven history. I was successful in brokering that meeting. Things can change."

"Nothing ever changes," she hisses, her chest rising and falling with quick breaths. "You will marry your stepsister or so help me, I'll—"

"You'll what?" I interrupt. "I know you've never liked me, but you can't force me to marry a woman I dislike as much as she dislikes me. I can't marry Liriel. Not now. I won't live like that."

Zaphira puts her shoulders back. Her lips curve in a cruel smile. "You swore an elven vow. It's unbreakable. If you don't marry my daughter by midnight on the winter solstice, you'll die."

"I haven't forgotten." I lift my chin. "If anyone knows how to break an elven vow, it's my father. I'm going to ask him, because I refuse to marry a woman I don't love. Not now."

"Winter and Summer have always fought," Zaphira snaps, fisting her hands at her sides. "I put a stop to it. You speak of history? Consider what I've done, you spoiled child. *I* sacrificed to keep the peace between our courts. *I* remain here, alone, in this godsforsaken land, so that everyone else may sleep easy in their beds. *I* sacrificed, Abelin, and you will too."

I stand taller, Izig and Sully at my sides. "I won't," I say. "I can't. I will marry, but to the man I love. The Winter Court will have to accept it."

Zaphira sighs. She shakes her head slowly, the diamonds in her ears reflecting the pale firelight. "I thought you might say that. Guards!"

I freeze, muscles tightening. Sully yowls a warning.

A door to our left crashes open. A dozen of my father's guards storm through and pause, weapons in their hands.

I glare at my stepmother. "What's this? Whatever you're planning, my father won't stand for it."

She doesn't deign to answer, merely looks over at the guards. "You know what to do," she says softly.

They spring into motion, but I'm one step ahead. Grabbing Izig, I whirl and sprint for the door, only to be stopped by Ybris. The big basilisk's coils tumble over each other, his scales rattling against the marble.

Darting forward, I hit him with an uppercut, knocking his head back. Ybris snarls, body writhing in circles as he shakes his head and snaps his teeth. I leap over his round body with Sully at my side and Izig on my heels. I hit the door, flinging it open and stumbling into the foyer.

A spear tip lodges under my chin, the point grazing the hollow of my throat and forcing me to a halt. The guard who holds the spear glares. Behind him, a dozen more stand at the ready, javelins aimed at my chest.

Goddess help me, I pray. *Let me get back to Jasper. Let me bask in our love for a little while longer. I'll do anything.*

"We must fight," Izig growls. He widens his stance, raising both fists. He's a fair brawler. He

should be—he learned from me.

The guards advance. I dip under the row of spears, punching the first guard between the legs. He doubles over, a grunt wheezing from his chest. The other guards pounce, javelins thrusting at me.

Izig throws a punch, sending a guard reeling. I spring into action, swinging as I dodge the guards' speartips. And then I'm a whirl of fists, desperation rising as I labor toward the doors. I've got to get to Jasper—to protect him from whatever Zaphira might be planning. Grunting, I call on every fighting technique I've honed over the years.

Izig shouts. Sully screams in pain, and something clocks me on the back of the head. I fall to my knees but struggle back up, fury pushing me harder. I won't go down like this. I can't lose Jasper. I fucking refuse.

"Hold him!" Zaphira shouts behind me. Guards pile on top of me, flattening me to the marble. Sully screams in our bond. I struggle to press off the chilled surface, but I'm no match for a pile of elven guards. I call the sun, but I can't access Her here. I can't see Her or feel Her.

That's why Zaphira covered the windows. Why didn't I see it?

Hands grab at me, jerking me to my feet. I shove against them, head-butting the guard closest to me. He drops with a grunt, but another takes his place, and another and another. I'm fucking surrounded. There's no way out.

I roar. Zaphira appears in front of me, a vicious smile curving her lips.

"Tsk tsk, Abelin. I need your obedience, boy. Let me take your mind off that ridiculous pixie and any stupid ideas you have. Your betrothal to my daughter holds. You *will* marry Liriel at the winter solstice." She directs a sharp look at the guards. "Hold him still. If he jerks around too much, the geas won't hold."

A geas. Fuck no.

"You can't do this," I shout. "Nylian would never allow this."

She laughs, the haughty sound cutting through me like a knife. Guards pin me in place as she stalks closer. I push and shove as the others part, revealing two guards carrying Sully and Izig. Sully hisses and snaps his fangs, but the guards hold him by the scruff and tail. Blood drips to the floor from a slash above Izig's eye.

Zaphira's smile spreads as she moves to me and places a flat palm on my chest. I jerk away from her touch, but six guards hold me tight. I'm going nowhere.

"Your father will never know, Abelin. But don't worry." She scratches her nails down my cheek. "You won't remember, either. You won't remember we had this conversation. You won't remember that it was me who did this to you. And you sure as the gods of winter will never remember that bothersome pixie in your bed."

"No!" I bellow, jerking against the guards. I roar protests, but Zaphira's palm remains pressed to my chest. A chill starts at the top of my head and steals down my body. Sully screeches and hisses, but his fury is a dull thwomp around the muffled noise taking over my thoughts. I shake my head to dispel it.

No! Jasper!

I cling to a memory of him from last night. He threw his head back as he rode me. Held my hands as he screamed that he loved me.

Don't take him, I plead to the sun. *Please, don't let her take him from me.*

But the sun can't answer. Not here, in this cursed place where warmth is only a memory. Zaphira must have spelled the whole mansion somehow.

Murky fog descends on my consciousness as I scratch and kick and bite. Blood fills my mouth. I

don’t know if it's mine or someone else’s.

I picture Jasper as I rage. But his face is a blur. The more I strain toward it, the foggier it gets. I scream in anguish as I tear myself from the guards’ arms, only to be slammed to the floor by more bodies.

Time slows, and my mind grows hazy. Hands turn me onto my back. My vision narrows to the ceiling. It used to be painted with sunbursts and dappled glades filled with playful nymphs. Now, thousands of crystal-blue icicles point down like a wall of knives ready to impale me. Zaphira is ripping Jasper from my mind and I can’t do anything to stop her.

I sob as I slog through muddy memories, trying to dredge up Jasper’s face, or his hands, or… anything at all about the man I love. But there’s nothing.

Nothing but icicles that seem to laugh at me from above. Or maybe that’s Zaphira cackling with victory because she’s won.

Ice is in my head, my heart, my soul. It’s everywhere.

My mind goes blank, snowflakes falling somewhere inside me. I close my eyes, but the snowflakes pepper my face like tiny bullets. I hate the snow.

“Prince Abelin!”

A sharp voice cuts through my thoughts. I blink my eyes open to find snow falling inside the foyer of my father’s house at Fourneclaire. Around me are two dozen of my father’s—well, now my stepmother’s—guard. They lie in various states of disarray, some passed out, most bloody. Izig and Sully stand by my side. The confusion on their faces matches my muddled thoughts. My body aches. I look down at my hand. My knuckles are split. Blood trickles down my fingers.

My stepmother moves in front of me, her hands braced on her rounded hips.

“I’ll say this again,” she snaps. “What in the frozen hells are you doing?”

I blink, desperately grasping at thoughts that seem to elude me. My head spins, confusion pummeling me. Did… Did I do this? Did I come here for some reason and attack my stepmother’s guard? Why? Why would I do that?

Zaphira folds her arms and casts a piteous glance down my body. “I told you not to embarrass your father and me, Abelin.” She gestures around the foyer. Blood smears the marble floor. It looks like a warzone. My stepmother glares at me. “Your father is expecting you at court for dinner. My carriage will take you there, and we won’t mention what you did here. It would crush him to see you like this, Prince.” She spits out my title like she can’t stand to say it.

Everything hurts. What the fuck happened here? Was I drunk? I haven’t partied since I was young. *Not a playboy anymore.*

The words rise in my mind. Inexplicably, tears prick my eyes.

Zaphira waits, anger huddling around her like a cloak.

I run both hands through my hair, still struggling to understand. But duty above all, that’s what my father has always beat into me. So I drop my hands and nod. “Of course, Stepmother. I’m…sorry. I’m not sure I understand what’s going on.”

She glares at me. If icy daggers could shoot from her eyes, I know they would.

“You never do, Abelin. You never do.”

CHAPTER 5

JASPER

By midmorning, I'm wide awake and growing more worried by the second.

"Where the fuck are you, Vale Gentry?" I murmur as I stand at the bedroom window wearing one of Vale's dressing gowns. Below, Paris is fully awake, too, the city's streets bustling with activity. Everyday noises drift up—music and chatter and dogs barking. But the brownstone is silent and still. If Izig and Sulien accompanied Vale, they haven't returned.

Movement on the streets catches my eye. Bert darts between the hooves of a bearded centaur pulling a cart.

"Attention!" the centaur cries. Watch out. His hooves clatter on the cobblestones as he scowls at Bert.

Bert pays him no mind, just streaks to the brownstone and disappears under the stoop. A few seconds later, he squeezes through a gap in the trim around the fireplace. His sides heave like a bellows. The tips of his ears are faintly green.

He takes one look at me and collapses on his side on the rug before the fireplace. His whiskers twitch, the skin around them the same sickly shade as his ears.

"Rough night?" I ask, folding my arms.

His voice in my head is laced with misery. *"Don't you dare lecture me about drinking. You're the king of overindulgence."*

"How much did you have? A thimbleful?"

"I hate you."

"No, you don't," I say, smiling as I stride from the room. "Don't move."

"Don't worry."

Any other time, I'd let my smile spread. Maybe tease him some more. But anxiety gnaws at me, threatening to bloom into full-blown panic. Where is Vale? How long does it take to buy croissants?

As I reach the brownstone's sprawling kitchen, I glance at the clock above the big bay window. It's been three hours. Vale could have hit up every boulangerie in the neighborhood by now.

On the other hand, he left a note. Maybe he's planning something special.

I stop on the threshold of a spacious butler's pantry, my heart thumping hard. Seven hells, is he going to *propose*?

No, of course not. Shaking my head, I search the cabinets, rummaging through spices and canned goods. I move to the drawers. The first is obviously a junk drawer with scissors and a jumble of pens. I open another—and stare into it with a frown tugging at my brows.

What the...?

Rolls of white tape are stacked in neat rows. Nothing else. Just tape—*a lot* of it. Does Vale have

some sort of bondage fetish? Immediately, my head fills with images of me spread and bound on a chair, a gloriously nude Vale circling me with a wicked gleam in his eye.

"You've been holding out on me, you cocktease," I murmur, my dick tightening.

"Jasper?" Bert's voice in my head ends on a groan.

I shut the drawer and move to another set of cabinets. *"Hold on, I'm coming."*

"Speaking of…" A wet belch drifts across our bond. *"Did you jizz on this rug at any point over the past two weeks?"*

"Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to, Bertram."

"I knew it. Gross."

I rifle through yet another set of cabinets. At last, I spy my prize. "Gotcha," I say, triumph filling me as I pluck a jar of honey from a shelf. Grabbing a bowl and a kitchen towel, I head for the stairs.

Bert's grumblings turn to groans as I reenter the bedroom. He keeps it up while I fill the bowl with warm water in the en suite bathroom that's larger than my apartment back in the Hallows.

"You did this to yourself," I remind him as I carry the honey water across the room and place it on the rug. I kneel next to Bert and tickle the fur between his ears. "Come on. You'll feel better."

"I can't move. I'm dead."

"That's what you said last time." I scoop him gently from the rug and guide his head to the edge of the bowl. "Small sips."

"Fine." He touches his tongue to the surface. After a moment, he drinks more quickly, lapping at the mix of honey and water. His greenish pallor fades, and the tips of his ears grow pink and healthy-looking once more. He flicks his tail once…twice. Finally, he springs to his feet. After a second of wobbling in my palm, he gives himself a vigorous shake.

"Better?" I ask mildly.

"Good as new." He cocks his head, his expression intent like he's listening for something. *"Where's the cat?"*

Worry roars back. Bert must see it in my face because he places one paw on my wrist, the soft pads between his toes resting over my pulse.

"Jasper? What's wrong?"

"Vale's gone," I blurt, my worry exploding into panic at last. Words gush from me in a breathless tumble. "He left to get croissants and he's picky about croissants so at first I didn't think anything of it because, you know, *the French*, but it's been three hours and now I'm fucking worried, except Izig and Sulien aren't here and I assume they're with him—"

"Jasper."

"—but I don't know that. It wasn't in the note. He's never been gone like this and—"

"Jasper!"

Bert's screech bounces between my ears, snapping my mouth shut. I swallow, and then I speak the fear I've been too terrified to acknowledge until now. "I'm worried something happened to him."

"Please," Bert scoffs, *"he's an elf. Few among the Myth can take on a full-grown elf, let alone a prince."* Bert's voice softens in my mind. *"Besides, he's besotted with you. He might attempt to deny it, but the man is in love with you."*

My stomach flutters, memories of the kiss in front of the Eiffel Tower playing in my head. I look toward the window, where the twisted tip of the tower peeks above the top of a nearby building. "He doesn't deny it," I say. "He told me he loves me last night."

Bert whistles in my head. *"And what did you say?"*

"That I love him, too." I look at my oldest friend. "And I do, Bert. I'm in love with him. I'm all in,

and it's fucking terrifying." My throat burns. "But now he's gone."

"He's not," Bert says firmly. *"He left a note, right?"*

I nod.

"Well, there you—"

Loud knocking echoes through the brownstone. Sharp and insistent, it booms into the bedroom, making me jump to my feet with Bert in my hand. My heart lodges in my throat.

"Don't answer it," Bert says, his tone wary.

I look from him to the hallway outside the bedroom. "What if it's news about Vale?" I'm moving before I finish the sentence, my borrowed dressing gown flapping around my ankles as I head for the stairs. I descend them in a rush and hurry to the foyer. The knocking continues, each pound seeming to shake the whole building. Halfway to the front door, I bend and deposit Bert on the marble tile.

"Careful," he warns, and I nod as I go to the peephole and look out.

My breath catches.

A tall elven warrior stands on the stoop There's no mistaking him for anything else. Long, pale hair cascades over his shoulders. Pointed ears peek from among the shimmering strands, which are braided away from his face. His features are flawless, but that's not what makes my stomach drop to my knees. No, it's not his looks. It's his clothing.

His golden armor and sunburst breastplate mark him as a warrior of the Summer Court. The silver greyhound badge pinned to his red cloak identifies him as a messenger of King Nylian.

Vale's father.

My hand trembles as I open the door.

"Jasper Lilygully?" the elf asks, his leaf-green eyes hard.

"Yes?"

The elf hands me a piece of paper. Then he turns and descends the steps.

"Wait!" I call. When the elf stops and gives me a cold look over his shoulder, it's all I can do to keep the tremor from my voice. "Vale… Is he okay?"

The elf's expression grows glacial. "I don't read the missives I deliver, pixie." He swings back around and leaves, his cloak flaring behind him.

Heart racing, I step back and fumble for the door, my movements clumsy. Bert appears, his dark eyes anxious as he looks from my face to the note in my hand.

"What does it say?"

"I don't…" My throat closes as I break the sunburst seal and see Vale's familiar, bold handwriting.

It's been fun.

My heart stops. Just seizes for a second before tripping over itself, the beats so hard and fast I stumble backward.

"Jasper?" Bert calls my name from somewhere. He paws at my legs, but I hardly feel it. My world shrinks to the words on the page. Three terse, black lines on paper the color of sunshine.

It's been fun. But I must return to my duties. You have my permission to remain in the brownstone through the end of the

week.

Yours,
HRH Prince Abelin of the Summer Court.

The words blur. Dimly, I'm aware of Bert tapping our bond, of his voice flowing through my brain. But I can't make out things like speech and syntax. The only words that register are the ones on the paper.

It's been fun.

Duties.

You have my permission.

Over and over, the lines parade before my eyes—an inky marching band trampling my heart. Grinding that vulnerable organ to pulp.

My knees loosen. The foyer sways, the world threatening to slide from under my feet.

"No," I say aloud, and my voice in my ears brings me back. Gives me a solid foundation. I crush the paper in my fist, then fling it to the ground.

Bert chases it. Catching it between his front paws, he gives me a cautious look before unfolding the missive and reading it. *"Oh."*

"We're leaving," I snap, whirling and going to the stairs. "Right now!" I call over my shoulder. Bert is on my heels within seconds, his voice in my head labored as he runs up the treads.

"Where are we going?"

"Anywhere but here." Gods, he gave me permission to use his fucking house. I slam into the bedroom, flinging off Vale's dressing gown like it's poison.

No, *Abelin's* dressing gown. Vale isn't real.

He never was.

~

An hour later, I stand in a queue on the outskirts of Paris. A castle looms above the line of Myth creatures and a few humans, its turrets scorched and blackened. Gazzag of House Florenti is a notorious pain in the ass, but he's the only dragon in France at the moment. Which means he's the fastest method of getting the fuck out of Paris.

"Are you sure about this?" Bert asks in my head, his voice cutting through the chatter around us. He perches on my shoulder, where he's been casting me increasingly worried looks since we left the city. *"Gazzag charges an arm and a leg for flights. Sometimes literally."*

I fold my arms and ignore the pair of werewolves engaged in an animated conversation in front of me. *"Gazzag owes me a favor,"* I tell Bert. *"I helped him hook up with a banshee a few years ago."*

Bert eyes the castle. *"Will he charge extra for me?"*

"If he tries it, I'll remind him I set him up with the banshee's twin sister, too."

"All right." Bert shifts his feet on my shoulder. If he harbors any reservations about conserving his limbs, he keeps them to himself. A heavy silence falls across our bond, which has been strained since I left Vale's place. It's like neither of us can bring ourselves to acknowledge what happened.

Vale dumped me. Like any other elf, he used me and then tossed me away.

Through a note. The arrogant asshole sent me a note.

It's been fun.

Anger burns my throat, the emotion so thick I could choke on it. One of the werewolves bursts into laughter. He slaps his companion on the back, then doubles over, the sound of his mirth like claws on slate.

Clenching my jaw, I face the stone curtain wall that stretches along the path leading to the castle. Flyers cover the surface, advertising weight loss potions and antidotes for curses. On one poster, a demoness with white teeth and glossy hair promises to "help you find your European dream home."

Yeah, right. Europe is where dreams come to die.

The werewolves begin bickering about which type of wolfsbane is more potent. A witch turns around and tells them they're both wrong. More creatures join the argument, quickly taking sides. The conversation becomes a lively debate. Ordinarily, it might be amusing. A distraction to pass the time. But right now, my fingers itch to hex the whole fucking queue.

Memories rise unbidden—Vale jerking me from the path of a bicycling Frenchman, then threatening to shove the man's bicycle up his ass.

You should have let me hex him.

No. Anyone who wants to fuck with you has to get through me first.

But that was a lie. My throat tightens as I return my gaze to the wall of flyers. Was *everything* a lie? Doubts prickle through me. I left the brownstone in a state of shock. But maybe I was too hasty?

Dammit, Vale owes me an explanation. He talked a big game about wanting harmony between pixies and elves. About leading his people into a new era. And then he acted like a fucking coward and broke up with me via note. It's not like him. And if it *is* like him, I deserve to hear it directly from his lying mouth.

Resolve pounds through me. Just as I prepare to leave the queue, a door opens in the wall. Two humans in white coveralls step through, a thick roll of paper balanced between them. The taller of the two has a metal pail looped over his forearm. Together, they carry the paper down the line, murmuring thanks when people step out of their path. Halfway down the wall, the men stop and begin unrolling their paper. One pulls a paintbrush from his back pocket. The other sets his pail on the grass. The scent of glue reaches my nostrils.

Conversation dies down as the men set about spreading glue over the mess of flyers and posters. The crowd watches, curiosity on people's faces, as the pair fixes the new poster onto the wall, revealing a brilliantly painted design. Two portraits: a man and a woman facing each other. Between them, elegant letters announce an upcoming wedding. The taller human pats the last corner of his side of the paper into place and steps back.

My stomach drops.

No.

No fucking way.

No *fucking* way.

The man on the poster isn't a man at all. He's an elf. Prince Abelin Vale of the Summer Court. His features are gorgeous in profile. A golden crown nestles among his honey-brown hair. He faces an equally gorgeous woman—another elf with pale hair and icy blue eyes.

Princess Liriel of the Winter Court.

Between their portraits, the scrolling words announce their upcoming nuptials. Prince Abelin will wed Princess Liriel at midnight on the winter solstice.

"His stepsister," a gruff voice says beside me.

"What?" Bert says in my head, his voice ringing with shock.

I turn and meet the gaze of one of the werewolves. "Excuse me, what did you say?"

The wolf thrusts his chin toward the poster. "Princess Liriel is Prince Abelin's stepsister." The werewolf gives me a look. "The elves are into that freaky shit."

"You mean kinky shit," the other werewolf chimes in. The first wolf nods, and they chuckle as murmurs run through the crowd. Conversation starts back up, talk of the wedding spreading down the queue.

I hear none of it. Numbness settles over me, chasing away sorrow and anger. Chasing away every emotion until I'm hollowed out. Empty.

Bert is silent on my shoulder. But what can he say? Nothing will make this better. Royal weddings don't get planned in a couple of weeks. Vale was engaged when we met. He fucked me while he was engaged. He bought me ice cream and croissants while he was engaged to a woman. His fucking *stepsister*. He pulled me through cathedrals and museums. Bought me flowers and sucked my dick—and he didn't mean any of it. I was a diversion. One last gay fling before settling down to lead his straight, normal life as heir to the Summer Court.

Something inside me cracks. Cleaves in half. I'm moving before I know it, shoving Myth creatures out of the way as I storm up the path. Cries of "hey!" and "watch it!" follow in my wake, but they're nothing to me. Nothing matters except leaving this cursed place. This horrible city full of lying elves.

The castle gates appear. A lower house, non-shifter dragon in purple livery steps from the shadows and puts out a forestalling hand.

"You skipped the whole line, pixie."

I put my shoulders back. "Take me to your master. He knows who I am."

The dragon narrows his eyes, his gaze taking in Bert and my red-tipped wings. "You up to mischief?"

"No. Just done with men forever." To my horror, my voice cracks on the last word.

Abruptly, the dragon's expression softens. "Ah. So it's like that, then." He hesitates, then jerks his head toward the castle behind him. "Come on. I'll take you to Gazzag." As I fall into step beside him, he asks, "Where you headed?"

"Home. The Hallows."

And I'm never coming back.

PART TWO

WINTER

CHAPTER 6

VALE

I stare out the dining room window of my father's Paris estate. The Eiffel Tower sparkles in the distance, the twisted columns wrapped in lights.

It's beautiful. And it used to move me. A frown tugs at my brow.

Why doesn't it move me anymore?

"Vale!"

My father's deep voice breaks through my muddled thoughts.

I turn to my father. "Sorry, sir. I was lost there for a moment."

My king shifts backward in his chair and steeples his fingers in front of his broad chest. He's as regal and cold as ever, although I remember a time in my childhood when our home was filled with sunny warmth. But then Mother died. The Winter Court princess became my stepmother, and everything changed.

My father changed too. Streaks of pale blue glimmer in his once-golden hair. Navy flecks swim in his golden eyes. He and Zaphira live separate lives, but it doesn't matter. Her hold on him grows simply by virtue of their marriage. His griffin familiar, Olios, sits by his side. The beast shakes his lion's mane and lifts an eagle-like claw to scratch at the back of his ear.

"You're distracted, Abelin," Father murmurs. "It's been this way since Mab's court. Did something happen there?"

I look out the window again. Something about the Eiffel Tower draws me, like a memory I can't quite reach. Shrugging it off, I return my gaze to my sire. "You trusted me to visit Mab. She invited us to visit again. By all accounts, my mission was a success."

Father's golden eyes narrow. When I was a child, I swore the sun Herself shone from his eyes. Now I know it's simply a shrewd, assessing look. I've seen it hundreds of times in my four-hundred-and-some years.

I sigh. "I'm fine, Father, truly."

He lifts his chin. "The wedding is nearly here."

Something sour boils in my gut. The fucking wedding. I'd do anything to get out of it. I don't want Liriel. I want… Well, I don't know what I want. I suppose I want the freedom to love someone who loves me back.

"I'll do my duty," I say tightly.

"I have no doubt," Father replies with a brusque nod. Then his expression softens. "I know this feels like a sacrifice, Abelin, but in time you'll come to appreciate Liriel. The two of you have more in common than you think. You both lost a parent. Liriel doesn't speak of it often, but her father's death affected her deeply. The Winter Court was a sunnier place when King Filendor was alive."

Father settles more deeply in his chair as he shifts from personal matters to the more comfortable subject of politics. “His brother, Elendor, has done a serviceable job since he took over, but I think there’s room for improvement. That’s why your marriage to Liriel is key. By forging yet another bond with the Winter Court, we can—”

“Will that be all, Father?”

My father’s gaze sharpens. Olios stirs, obviously sensing the king’s displeasure at being interrupted. Gaze on me, my father reaches over and strokes the griffin’s shaggy head. He lets the silence hang for a moment before saying, “Zaphira tells me it’s been difficult to get ahold of you for the final wedding preparations.”

Anger sparks deep in my chest, and it’s all I can do not to snap my fangs. “I’ve done everything she’s asked.”

“Clearly not if she’s sending me messages to the contrary.”

“She’s always contrary,” I say, hearing the bitterness in my voice. “Particularly where I’m concerned.”

My father’s tone turns frosty. “This attitude is unhelpful, Abelin. You could at least make an effort to get along with your stepmother.”

“I agreed to marry her daughter. I’m doing my duty. Isn’t that enough?” My anger spills into my voice as I lean forward in my chair. “Please, Father, do not ask me to choose between snowflakes or icicles on the godsdamned napkins!”

My father’s golden eyebrows travel upward.

Olios lets out a warning growl, his amber eyes locked on me as he steps closer to the king. At my side, Sully hisses in return.

I sit back, and I drag deep breaths into my lungs as I wrestle with my runaway emotions. I’ve worked hard to prove my reckless playboy brawler days are over. “I’m sorry, Father.” Inspiration strikes, and I force a smile. “Wedding jitters. I let my nerves get the best of me.”

He rests his hands in his lap. I read nothing in his gaze—not anger or concern, not even irritation. How odd that someone who embodies the sun can be so cold.

“I’ll speak with Zaphira,” he says finally. “Why don’t you take the next two weeks to travel and get your head on straight.”

Surprise flits through me, followed by excitement at the thought of escaping court—and Zaphira’s wedding preparations—for a bit. I let a wry smile touch my lips. “You’re not worried I’ll disappear to South America and become a recluse in the Amazon?”

My father smiles. “You’ve proven you can handle a king’s responsibilities. I’m not worried about you, my son.”

Pride blooms like a field of wildflowers in my chest. They warm me from within, almost as if the sun Herself shines inside me. This is what I’ve worked for—earning his trust, earning the right to lead.

“Thank you, Father,” I murmur.

Silence stretches. When it grows uncomfortable, I clear my throat. But my father speaks first.

“I loved your mother. When she died, I longed to join her. Our marriage wasn’t the typical royal business transaction. I was so lucky that we managed to find love.” Bright eyes hold mine. “Perhaps you will, too, in time.”

I clench my jaw. That’ll never happen. But I can’t tell him why—even if we both know the reasons. I’ll never be physically attracted to Liriel. My father knows this, even if he chooses not to acknowledge it. Even if he understands full well that forcing me to wed a woman will doom me to a

union as cold and loveless as his own.

But my father is the king. And we don't speak of the things he refuses to see. So I repeat the mantra he's beaten into me for hundreds of years.

"My duty to the Summer Court comes first."

"Glad you see it that way."

When a servant arrives to pour his tea, I look out the window again.

The Eiffel Tower rises high above Paris, a glittering black beacon of human civilization. Despite everything it's been through, it endures.

Just like I'll have to.

Two days later, I stand with Izig and Sully in the middle of what used to be Manhattan.

Glittering towers rise around us, the modern buildings filled with shops and thriving businesses. This is the only part of the Hallows that resembles New York before The War That Ripped the Veil.

Despite the chilly air, monsters and humans mingle on the streets. It bustles far more than Paris. Normally, I'd miss the slow pace of life in my home city, but I ache for something frenetic and chaotic.

I need to fight.

"This again?" Sully pokes at me through our bond.

"I just need to let off some energy," I say for the millionth time since arranging this trip to America. *"And we have plenty of friends here."*

Sully brushes against me, winding his long body through my legs while I stare up at the towers.

A gust of wind knocks Izig's bowler hat off. As I lunge for it, a dark figure drops out of the sky. Gasps go up as it streaks to the ground, landing with a thud. Wings flare wide, and the figure straightens, revealing a handsome male in an impeccably tailored suit. Golden eyes twinkle as he takes a pull from the cigar perched between claw-tipped fingers.

"Gothel," I murmur, greeting one of my father's oldest friends. "Good to see you again."

The Lord of the Air Syndicate stalks forward, his free hand outstretched. As I take it in greeting, his whiskey-colored eyes crinkle at the corners. His hair is longer, the ends brushing his white collar. Otherwise, he's unchanged from the last time I saw him.

Well, except that he looks happier. He's recently mated, word has it.

He casts a quick glance over me before nodding at Sully and Izig. "Glad you could visit." He looks at me and smiles. "Your father mentioned you need to let off a little steam, Vale. Something about upcoming nuptials?"

I hold back a growl at the mention of my marriage. Nothing about it feels right to me. In fact, I'd rather not even discuss it.

Instead, I focus on the first half of his comment. "Letting off steam sounds great. I haven't been to the Aerie in a hundred years. Tell me you've still got a brawling pit in the basement."

He laughs, the sound like rocks sliding down a slab of granite. "Of course there's still a pit in the basement." He jerks his head toward one of the towers. "Come have a cigar with me. I think I've got a better idea, actually."

He reaches for my suitcase, but Izig snatches it away.

"I've got it, thank you very much," my butler rumbles.

Gothel raises a brow. “Very well.” Humor dances in his eyes as he takes another pull from his cigar. “Perhaps you could speak to my friend, Raoul. He never lifts a finger or dew claw to help me carry my bags.”

Izig grunts as if such a thing is inconceivable. I can only grin. Gothel’s grotesques are diminutive, stocky versions of him. They’re a miniature army, but also accountants and builders and architects. They’re adorable, although I’d never tell them that. I like my head attached to my shoulders.

Gothel leads us across the street. Humans and Myth creatures stop and stare as we pass. A few dip their heads, respect in their eyes as they acknowledge the powerful gargoyle.

What must that feel like? To be so obviously the master of your domain. For your people to speak in hushed tones when you go by? The elves of the Summer Court revere my father that way.

I want that for myself—the power and dominance. Or maybe I just long for freedom. Nobody tells my father no. He doesn’t twist himself into knots to fit a mold that wasn’t made for him. But I’m his heir, which means my options are limited. As in, I don’t have any. If I want to be king, I’ve got to accept my responsibilities.

Ruling the Summer Court won’t be easy. I know that, too. My future is full of sacrifice and hardship in the name of my Court.

That sacrifice starts with my wedding vows.

By the time we reach Gothel’s office, the lightheartedness I felt on the street is long gone. Now, my gut churns as I contemplate my upcoming wedding. Visions parade through my mind—Liriel in her wedding gown, Liriel saying her vows at my side, Liriel naked and spread before me on our wedding night.

Nausea burns my throat. There’s no love between us. She’ll look at me with disdain and anger, and that’ll be the way she looks at me for the rest of our lives. Duty is a noose around my neck. A weight across my shoulders. How long can I last before it presses me to my knees? A thousand years? Five thousand?

Gothel pulls a cigar from a box on his desk and hands it to me. He gives another to Izig, then produces a silver lighter and waits patiently as we touch the tips to the flame.

Sully sniffs at the air, his long whiskers twitching.

Gothel turns to me with a neutral expression. “I’ve got a proposal for you.”

I suck at the tip of the cigar, relishing the rich spices and hints of something floral. As I let smoke curl from my mouth, something potent hits my system. My dick hardens, the need to fuck slamming into me like dual fists in the gut.

“Damn,” I wheeze, just stopping myself from doubling over. I examine the tip of my cigar before meeting Gothel’s amused gaze. “I don’t remember your cigars packing this kind of punch.”

The office door opens, and a slender male enters. In an instant, Gothel shifts his attention to the beautiful creature, who smiles as he heads for the gargoyle. Platinum hair is slicked back from his handsome face and knotted on the back of his head. When Gothel’s horns straighten, the blond’s smile widens, revealing a pair of sharp-looking fangs.

Ah. This must be Tower du Sang, Gothel’s mate and leader of the du Sang crime family.

Confirmation comes a second later as Tower rises on tiptoe and kisses Gothel’s jaw. The big gargoyle grips the blond’s bun and bends him backward, deepening the kiss.

Izig casts me a disgruntled look.

“Well, this is indiscreet,” Sully says in my head.

It’s certainly unconventional—but I can’t look away. Longing fills me, along with a melancholy that rises so sharp and swift it steals my breath.

I stare at Gothel and Tower, my heart pounding. The beat echoes in my head, my thoughts coalescing into one loud, thumping word.

Missing.

I'm missing this.

But…how? Confusion swaps me. I can't miss what I never had, and I've never had a passion like this. But the longing remains. As I watch the men, the longing sinks its claws deep.

Love.

Connection.

Desire.

I want these things I'll never have.

Panic grips me, and the sensation is as confusing as the longing.

Sully stares at me, his golden eyes sharpening. His voice fills my head. *"What's wrong? Are you sick?"*

I shake my head. *"I'm fine."*

Gothel and Tower part. The gargoyle turns whiskey-brown eyes back to me. The corners are still crinkled from his smile. He looks so godsdamned blissful. "Vale, this is my mate, Tower du Sang. Sweetheart, this is Prince Vale of the Summer Court."

Blue eyes flash as Tower smiles and offers his hand. "I've heard quite a lot about you, Your Highness."

I clear my throat as I shake his hand. "Call me Vale. And most of what you've heard isn't true. Or so far in the past that it doesn't bear mentioning any longer." I give my host a warning look. Gothel saw me during the very worst of my fiery playboy years. Gargoyles have long memories. Undoubtedly, he remembers my more outlandish exploits.

Gothel inclines his head. "You've arrived at the perfect time, Vale. The Hallows' annual Syndicate Ball is tonight." Gothel gives Tower a commiserating look. "I think the prince should serve as my champion. What do you think, my love?"

Tower smiles at Gothel like they're the only two men in the world.

Something inside me shatters into a million miserable pieces.

"Fuck, yes," Tower murmurs. "You said he can fight, right?" The vampire looks at me, his shrewd gaze sizing me up. "You ought to give Ursan a run for his money."

I cock my head. "Ursan?"

"A sea witch," Tower says. "And the new Lord of the Sea Syndicate. He's recently mated." Tower chuckles. "Well, doubly mated."

Gothel strokes a lock of platinum hair away from the vampire's face and coaxes it back into his bun.

My stomach churns at their happiness.

Two mates. I can't fathom it. I'd kill for one I actually wanted.

Gothel turns to me. "The Brawl is the highlight of the Syndicate Ball. I can't stray from my buildings, so Tower is going in my stead. Go with him, Vale. You can fight as my champion. Ursan will be a formidable competitor. Even without his magic, he's big and powerful. It'll be a lot more stimulating than the pit in the basement."

"And you look like you could stand to pound someone," Tower says, winking at me.

Gods, he's right. In every way. But there won't be any more pounding for me, at least not outside of a boxing ring. I grit my teeth so hard my jaw feels ready to crack.

Gothel takes another pull of his cigar, then smiles through a ring of smoke. "Well, Your

Highness…you in?"

Izig shoots me a look of warning.

"This is a terrible idea," Sully says in my head.

He's right. They both are. But for the first time in months, some of the weight on my shoulders lifts. No one knows me here. And with a strong enough glamour, I can blow off some steam without anyone being the wiser.

I smile as I give Gothel a nod. "I'm in."

CHAPTER 7

JASPER

The Syndicate Ball used to be my favorite event of the year. Now, I'd rather be just about anywhere else.

I stand with my back against a wall in a shadowy corner, my arms folded over my chest. My wings are concealed under my jacket. A black silk half-mask imbued with a powerful glamour lends me additional anonymity. Before me, a wild party rages. Couples lean close, painted lips brushing. Hands roam silk-clad bodies. Laughter rings and champagne flows. It's every pixie's dream.

And I want nothing to do with it.

Music pumps through the old cathedral, the bass pulsing in sync with the bright colors that flash over the crowd. Creatures from every corner of the Myth fill the cavernous space. Tonight only, friends and enemies alike gather to celebrate another year of peace in the Hallows. Members of all four syndicates gather to fuck and feast anonymously.

Well, mostly anonymously. A few particularly boisterous revelers have knocked their masks askew, revealing their true identities. And not every mask can fool me.

Unbidden, memories rise.

I'm better than most at seeing under glamour.

In my head, in the places I've avoided venturing over the past six months, honey-colored eyes smile. *Is that so?*

"Damn you," I whisper as tears burn my eyes. I press my back harder against the wall on the edge of the crowd. In the center of the former sanctum, masked workers put the finishing touches on the elevated platform that will serve as the stage for the Ball's main entertainment: the Brawl.

Heads turn as the workers lift black fencing panels and secure them, slowly erecting a chain link cage. A masked man in a crisp tuxedo carries a pair of low stools through the crowd. When he reaches the platform, he ascends a set of stairs and places the stools in opposite corners. He pulls something from his pocket and places it on the center of one of the stools.

I lean forward as I struggle to make out the object. The man steps back, giving me a clear shot of a roll of gleaming white tape.

Memory tugs at me again. White tape. A whole drawer of it.

You've been holding out on me, you cocktease.

My throat tightens. On the dance floor, couples sway to the music. No one here is going home alone tonight.

Tears prick my eyes.

Fuck, I've got to get out of this place. I wipe at my eyes, but the damn mask gets in the way.

Cursing under my breath, I lift it and wipe at my face as I lurch away from the wall. I get two steps when a heavy hand clamps down on my shoulder.

"Hold, Lilygully," a deep voice says, the tone more growl than speech.

I turn and meet the gaze of a towering, masked male dressed in a tuxedo working overtime to constrain his muscles. Blue eyes peer at me from behind a dark-brown mask. Shivers tremble down my spine, setting my senses tingling. For a moment, the man's eyes waver between blue and a deep, glittering amethyst. His hair flips from brown to black and back again.

Then it settles on black. His eyes shine that arresting purple.

"Wotan," I say, shrugging deliberately from his grip and letting my mask fall back into place. I flick an imaginary speck of dust from the spot on my jacket where Wotan rested his hand. "How wonderful to see you again. It's taboo to true-name someone at the Syndicate Ball. Then again, you hunt people for sport so I guess I shouldn't expect you to follow the rules."

He smiles, displaying white fangs. "You're one to talk, pixie. You never met a rule you didn't enjoy breaking."

I give him a mischievous look I can almost convince myself I feel. "Yes, but it's *cute* when I do it."

Wotan opens his mouth to reply just as a tall, broad-shouldered redhead appears at his side. The newcomer hands Wotan a drink before flashing a bright grin at me.

"Jasper! I thought it was you under there."

"Ryder Connelly," I say, "my favorite witch." As his grin spreads, I jerk my thumb toward the crowd. "Can you see under everyone's masks?"

"I'm better at it than I used to be," he says, his tone modest. "Probably not as good as you."

I smile. "Oh, honey, no one's as good as I am."

Wotan folds his arms over his thick chest and glowers at me.

I gesture from Ryder Connelly's shock of red hair to his brown silk mask. "Are you and Wotan wearing matching masks?" I look at Wotan. "You lost a bet, didn't you?"

"No comment," Wotan grumbles.

Ryder laughs and takes the Lord of the Earth Syndicate's hand. He gives the beast of a male a slow, easy smile as he laces their fingers together. "I made it worth his while."

"You did," Wotan rasps, his harsh features softening.

My gut clenches. I reach for my connection with Bert—and remember too late that I left him at home. The Syndicate Ball used to be one of his favorite events, too. But he declined to attend tonight. I should have followed his example. Although, our relationship has been strained since we returned from Paris. Before, we slipped in and out of each other's minds like a river. But lately, it's like every time I want to talk to Bert, that flow gets logged up. Dammed.

"Jasper?"

I jump as Ryder's voice yanks me from my thoughts. Worry shades his green eyes as he stares at me. Beside him, Wotan frowns.

I clear my throat. "I, uh…I should go."

Ryder's auburn brows pull together. "You're leaving before the Brawl?"

"Of course he's not," a voice rumbles behind me. Another hand clamps on my shoulder, and suddenly I'm surrounded by tall mermen.

And one smiling sea witch.

The new Lord of the Sea Syndicate sticks out his hand. "Ursan, Son of Crallek." He flashes a boyish, disarming grin. "I know we're not supposed to true-name, but Triton heard Ryder call you

'Jasper' and, well, I wanted to say hi."

"Did he, really?" I murmur, meeting Triton's gaze before looking at Ursan again. "Now that I think about it, I *do* remember something about the big guy having excellent hearing."

Triton grunts, adopting a pose similar to Wotan's.

"I'm not sure if you remember me," Ursan adds, pink dusting the bridge of his nose. A dimple appears in his cheek.

At his shoulder, Ari Razorfin stifles a moan, then coughs into his fist. Triton slides a satisfied look over both of his mates, a smile thawing some of the ice in his blue eyes.

"I remember, my lord," I tell Ursan, shaking his hand. Somehow, I muster enough energy to wink as I run my gaze over his thick pecs. "I never forget a chest."

Ursan's blush deepens. Ari rolls his eyes.

Triton chuckles.

I give him a pointed look. "I heard the same about you, Your Majesty."

The towering merman shakes his head. "All in the past now, pixie. I'm happily mated twice over."

Abruptly, the tears threaten to return. Clearing my throat, I look around the group. "No one brought flame zaddy tonight?"

"Fuoco is here," Wotan says, jerking his head toward the other side of the cathedral. "He's just busy snarling at anyone who dares to look at his mate too long."

I follow the direction Wotan indicated. Sure enough, Fuoco holds court in one corner, dragons from lesser houses standing guard around him and Beau. Fuoco is dressed to kill in one of his corsets and a tie glamoured to look like a waterfall. Beau's suit is just as extravagant, the amethyst shade a perfect complement to his dark good looks. As a man drifts toward the baker, green flames leap around Fuoco's head.

The man quickly spins and heads in the opposite direction. Beau shoots Fuoco an exasperated look. The giant dragon lord shrugs. After a second, Beau's shoulders shake with laughter.

Happy. They're happy. I helped bring them together. If only I could find that kind of love for myself.

Triton places a big palm on Ursan's shoulder. "We should get you ready."

"Ready?" I ask, looking between them.

Ursan's blush deepens. "I'm serving as the Sea's champion tonight."

I raise my brows. "You want to fight?"

"Well, it's not that I *want* to—"

"Yes, he does," Ari says, arrogance touching his handsome features. The sexy scar on his upper lip curls as he shoots his mate a look laced with pride. "I've been working with him. Taught him everything I know."

Ursan's blush spreads. But as he locks eyes with Ari, his bashfulness gives way to something undeniably heated.

A knife twists in my gut, the thrust so wrenching I suck in a breath.

All eyes turn to me. Triton's gaze sharpens, then sprints down my suit. "Black tonight, Jasper? That's an unusual choice for you."

More eyes travel down my suit. A few party-goers turn, curiosity gleaming in their eyes.

Unease settles over me. I force levity into my voice. "A gesture of goodwill. When you look as good as I do, you start to feel sorry for everyone else." I examine my manicure, which is the same glossy black as my outfit. "I didn't want to outshine you boys."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I long to snatch them back. The towering males around me

don't give a solitary shit about attracting notice. They're all happily mated—matched with companions handpicked by Fate.

And brought together with my assistance.

The knife in my gut sinks deeper.

Ursan steps toward me, his affable charm replaced with an unmistakable air of authority. "Is something wrong?"

"No," I say quickly, backing up. My shoulders bump the wall, and I shuffle sideways. As half a dozen worried eyes pin me, panic climbs up my throat.

I swallow it—and draw on ninety years of world-class snark. Still moving sideways, I fan my face. "Puck's ballsack, you're a thirsty lot. Sorry, fellas, but there's only so much Jasper Lilygully to go around." Stepping free of the scrum, I move a few paces away and toss an exasperated look over my shoulder. "Go suck each other's faces or something. I'm getting a drink."

Throat tight, I let the crowd swallow me—and I avoid eye contact as I make my way to the bar.

One drink.

One drink and I'll make my exit. If I leave any sooner, people might talk. The last thing I need is people gossiping about me. Irritation prickles over my nape. Damnit, *I* do the gossiping. Huffing, I signal the hydra behind the bar.

But she doesn't see me as she moves away, her heads swiveling in every direction but mine.

"Fuck," I mutter.

"Rough night?" a silky voice murmurs, and then Tower du Sang slides onto the barstool next to me. His true form is concealed under a mundane glamour, the nondescript brown hair and muddy brown eyes nothing like his staggering blond beauty.

The air crackles, and then a booming voice fills the air. "THE FIRST BRAWL BEGINS! EARTH VERSUS THE SEA."

The cathedral erupts in a chorus of cheers and catcalls. Revelers stream toward the platform, which is suddenly illuminated by a dozen spotlights. Ursan makes his way toward the platform, pulling off clothing as he goes. Triton and Ari flank him, both merman pushing away Myth creatures before they can get too close to the sea witch. When Ursan pauses to remove his trousers, Ari's gaze narrows on the brawny male's ass. The merman's green eyes glitter as he bites his bottom lip.

Sighing, I turn and rest my elbows on the bar. Wotan's champion mounts the platform, his ripped body encased in a pair of tight brown shorts. A second later, Ursan climbs the steps. The ass Ari admired is now covered in nothing but a thin layer of aquamarine-colored fabric.

A bell rings. The men advance toward each other with raised fists. Wotan's champion swings. Ursan ducks, then pops up and delivers a swift right hook to the other man's jaw.

The cathedral erupts with cheers.

Wotan's champion recovers, and the men bob and swing as they begin to brawl in earnest.

I watch for a moment before turning to Tower. "Are you wearing your Rune disguise just to fuck with Wotan?"

The vampire's lips curve. Slowly, he turns and matches my pose, his lanky body radiating elegance as he leans against the bar. "I thought that was your modus operandi, Lillygully." He looks at me. "Fucking with people."

I exhale noisily, and I don't throttle the irritation in my voice as I ask, "Is everyone in this place gifted with the ability to peer under glamour?" I wave a hand in front of my face. "Why wear a mask at all?"

Tower laughs softly. "Aw, but you look so good in it."

"Well, that's true," I mutter, turning my attention to the platform just as Ursan delivers a vicious uppercut to Wotan's fighter.

The crowd roars, the noise vibrating the marble floor under my feet.

Tower's regard is a weight against the side of my face.

I speak without taking my gaze off the fight. "Are you sizing up my jugular, du Sang? Because I should warn you, pixies taste terrible."

He laughs again. In my peripheral vision, he looks toward the platform. "Tempting, Lilygully, but I don't want to steal your magic."

"Making men lose their minds?"

"Matchmaking." Still gazing straight ahead, he leans into me and lowers his voice. "Rumor has it you're carrying on your grandfather's work." He pauses, and his voice dips a bit lower. "Your aunt must be proud."

On the platform, Ursan slams a fist into his opponent's face. Wotan's champion flies into the cage's chain link, which shudders under his weight. He staggers, then drops to the mat, knocked out cold.

Memories of a sun-dappled path flood my mind. Golden eyes twinkle as strong hands hold open a hedge for me to duck through.

But maybe I should call you Your Highness.

Only Mab uses a title.

But you're her nephew.

Yeah, well, I guess we've let that cat out of the bag.

The golden eyes smile. *Was it a secret?*

That smile. It glowed more brightly than the sun, warming me from the inside out.

I tried not to let it disarm me. But I was powerless from the moment its owner bumped into me. *You're the Prince of the Summer Court. You know damn well it was a secret.*

People are going to want to know more about you, Jasper. And I'm the first in line.

The roar of the crowd fills my ears, pulling me abruptly into the present. Tower straightens, his nonchalance replaced with razor-sharp alertness. His glamour flickers, giving me glimpses of the crime boss wrapped in a pretty package of bright blue eyes and long platinum hair.

"The Sky Syndicate is up next," he says, gaze on the platform as the next round of fighters replace Earth and Sea.

"You're not fighting in Gothel's stead?"

Tower looks at me. He flips up his mask, briefly dropping his glamour. "And risk *this* bone structure?"

I try for a smile but I'm not sure I achieve it, so I swing my gaze back to the platform. "Just admit you're scared, vampire." My throat burns. The phantom scent of French bread hits my nostrils. Fills my lungs. Climbs inside me and refuses to fucking leave.

I'm still calling this *French bread.*

Warm, teasing laughter fills my head. *Baguette, Jasper.*

The fighters representing Fire and Air face off in the center of the cage. One man wears burnt orange shorts. The other wears the light-blue shade of a cloudless sky. The flimsy fabric hugs an incredible ass. Desire thrums through me. As soon as it hits, I shove it away. Whoever the guy is, he's wearing a glamour. Those tight, round cheeks aren't real.

But, damn, they're sexy.

And…familiar.

Tower chuckles. “Fuoco’s champion isn’t going to know what hit him.”

I lean forward, squinting at the platform. The blue-clad fighter’s back is turned to me as he jogs in place. Something on his leg catches my eye. A tattoo?

The announcer strides to the center of the cage and raises his arms. His magic-amplified voice shakes the walls of the cathedral. “THE FIRE SYNDICATE VERSUS THE SKY SYNDICATE! WINNER FACES THE SEA IN THE FINAL ROUND!”

Fuoco’s champion jogs in place, jabbing at the air. The fighter representing Gothel drops into a ready position, his muscled body taut. Some kind of markings trail down one thick thigh.

A bell rings. Fuoco’s champion surges forward, big fists flying. Gothel’s man dances back, bobs, and then throws a punch that connects swiftly with the other man’s ribs.

Cheers split the air, but I hardly hear them. I lean forward, my gaze on the blue-clad fighter’s thigh.

The markings flicker.

A glamour. No one is supposed to see that tattoo.

But I do. I’m the grandson of the old pixie king. Few can hide from my line.

Fuoco’s champion swings.

Gothel’s champion moves like water, sliding effortlessly out of the way.

I take a step forward, my heart thumping faster as I peer at his thigh.

With a roar, Fuoco’s champion swings again.

The fighter in the blue shorts sidesteps, then brings up his hands.

Taped hands. I’ve been staring at his legs for so long, I didn’t notice the tape.

My heart stutters.

White tape.

Rolls of it. A whole drawer of it.

You’ve been holding out on me, you cocktease.

Gothel’s champion throws a punch—a vicious, precise right hook that crashes into the other man’s jaw like a sledgehammer.

Fuoco’s champion lurches sideways. Stumbles. Goes down.

The crowd cheers.

The man in the blue shorts turns all the way toward me. His glamour flickers. And, suddenly, I see right through it.

The sun’s rays wind down his thigh. They wrap around his dick, too, even though no one in the cathedral but me knows it.

Because I know him. I wish I’d never met him. He broke my heart in Paris.

I swing toward Tower, and my voice emerges as a savage growl. “Gothel’s champion is the Prince of the Summer Court?”

Tower shoves away from the bar. “Keep your voice down, Lilygully.” He seems to realize what I just said, because confusion covers his features. “Wait. You know Vale?”

“Unfortunately. How the fuck do you know him?” The knife in my gut twists sharply. If Vale fucked Tower du Sang…

“His father is a friend of Gothel’s,” Tower says. The vampire glances at the platform, his air of arrogance replaced with unmistakable worry. “What’s going on, Lilygully?”

“Nothing.” *Just the man who dumped me showing up in my home unannounced.*

And unwelcome.

Abruptly, fury burns away every trace of heartache. It roars within me, obliterating the noise of

the crowd until all that's left is the thud of my heartbeat in my ears.

I turn back to the platform, where the announcer raises Vale's arm in the air. "THE WINNER! GOTHEL'S CHAMPION ADVANCES TO THE FINAL ROUND: SEA VERSUS SKY."

Oh, fuck you. And fuck no.

I'm moving before I know it, shoving all manner of creatures from my path. I cross the cathedral, and then I'm gripping Ursan's bicep and tugging him around.

Startled brown eyes go wide. Ursan drips with sweat, the flush of his recent victory in his cheeks. "Jasper! Are you okay?"

"Let me be your champion."

Ursan's jaw drops open. Ari looms over his shoulder, his ruddy eyebrows pulling tightly together.

"You can't mean to fight, Lilygully," Ari says.

"I'm going to kick his ass." I rip my suit jacket off and look at Ursan. "Please. I need to get up there."

The Lord of the Sea Syndicate looks from me to the platform. When he returns his gaze to me, his eyes are wary but kind. "You know that man?"

"Yes. And I would very much like to kill him."

Ari makes a low sound. "Lilygully, I don't know the guy, but he's a pro. Only experienced fighters move like that. One punch and you'll be swallowing teeth."

I keep my gaze on Ursan. "Please. I need this."

"Why?" Ari demands. "You'll get—" He clamps his mouth shut as Ursan holds up a hand. The sea witch gives me an assessing look, his dark eyes so penetrating I fight the urge to squirm. After a minute, he nods.

"All right. You'll represent the Sea."

"Thank you." Triumph surges briefly, but it's quickly replaced with another spike of fiery anger. I turn to the platform, where Vale stands docile as two men towel him off and squirt water down his throat.

The announcer calls for the Sea Syndicate's champion to come forward.

Someone produces a strip of aquamarine cloth. Ursan ties it around my arm, and I make my way to the platform with Ursan and Ari flanking me. The crowd surges around us, the noise deafening. Magic shimmers in the air. Violence dogs my steps, but it's nothing compared to the rage searing my veins.

Ursan and the announcer engage in a brief shouting match as they struggle to hear each other over the crowd. After a tense moment, the announcer nods.

Ursan turns to me with a sober expression. "I hope you know what you're doing, Jasper." He puts a steady hand on my arm. "You're on."

I climb the steps. The crowd chants, the roar swelling as the spotlights hit me.

Across the platform, Vale stands near his stool. His golden eyes fill with confusion as he takes me in. Above his mask, his smooth brow furrows. He moves toward me, and my heart beats faster.

Now. Finally. I'm going to get some fucking answers. And then I'm going to tell him to go fuck himself.

His shadow falls over me. Sweat glistens on his skin.

The same as it did when he made love to me and said he'd do anything to keep me.

I clench my fists at my sides.

He stops. Hesitates. Offers his hand.

I squeeze my fists more tightly. "I'm not shaking your fucking hand, you asshole."

He frowns. His deep, French-accented voice is muffled by the crowd, but it reaches me all the

same.

"I beg your pardon. Do I know you?"

CHAPTER 8

VALE

My hand remains outstretched between us, but my opponent doesn't take it.

He doesn't belong up here. The Sea Syndicate's champion looked like a fighter—brawny and quick on his feet in that first round. This male is…well, he's not that. I can't see his true form, but his glamour is lanky and lean. I run my gaze down his body. His fists are balled, his thumbs tucked inside his fingers—a surefire way to break bones when you punch.

I drop my hand and step back. Maybe this is a trick meant to throw me off guard. Undoubtedly, that's what Izig would say. Regret sluices through me. I probably hurt his feelings by asking him to stay behind at the hotel tonight. But I wanted to fight without my ogre butler shooting me reproachful looks from the crowd. Sully and Izig have never approved of my brawling habit.

Sully—who ignored my request to stay away—speaks softly in my head. *"Who is this new opponent? Why isn't the big guy fighting you?"*

"I don't know. He doesn't look like a fighter, and he's acting like he knows me."

Sully growls into our bond. *"We've seen this sort of thing before. He's probably trying to get into your head. Ignore it."*

I nod as I hold the handsome man's gaze. He's stunning. Beyond stunning. He's fucking gorgeous—or his glamour is, anyway.

He moves both fists to his hips, his stance not nearly wide enough to keep him on his feet during a fight. "Got nothing to say, Prince?" He spits my title with shocking venom.

I stiffen. Nobody should recognize me here. My face is well-glamoured. Yet the male before me not only knows who I am, but he seems to think I should know him as well. Growling, I shove into his space and snap my fangs.

He jerks and takes a step back, then flashes an acid smile. "Two can play this game, you fucking asshole." Reaching up, he undoes the string on his mask and rips it off. Glamour flows away from him, revealing the most beautifully sensual male I've ever seen.

A trick. It has to be. Narrowed blue eyes fringed with long, golden-brown lashes shoot daggers at me. Nostrils flare in apparent anger. Blond brows several shades darker than his short, platinum hair frame the man's delicate features. His ears taper to points. At his back, stiffly veined iridescent wings flutter.

A pixie. My confusion grows. Pixies aren't fighters. But this one looks like he wants to rip me limb from limb. Even so, he's not dressed to brawl.

His expensive-looking suit hugs a lithe body. I've stood across the ring from enough fighters to know when someone is out of their depth. There's a hint of muscle in the pixie's shoulders, but he's no match for someone my size. And if I had to wager, I'd bet he's never thrown a serious punch in his

life.

Apprehension prickles down my spine. I spin in place and address the referee. “What are you playing at? This isn’t right.”

The ref shrugs, moving a toothpick around his mouth with his tongue. “The Sea says it’s okay. Who am I to deny one of the four syndicate lords?”

The deep sense of *wrongness* swells. I’m an experienced fighter. Sometimes, the scrawniest opponents can be the scrappiest. But that’s not the case here. I’ve fought enough to know it.

“Fight me, Vale,” the pixie demands.

I whirl around and meet his angry blue eyes. He used my real fucking name.

As shock holds me immobile, he launches himself at me. Before I can react, he grips my throat and gives a savage hiss. Delicate wings flutter at his back. I could rip them right off his body. He’s left himself totally open.

I pull out of his grip and shove him away. When he leaps for me again, I punch him swiftly in the gut. He doubles over and falls back against the cage’s chain link, wheezing out a harsh breath.

He didn’t block me. He’s not getting up fast, either.

I swivel around to the ref, but he just crosses his arms and jerks his head toward the other male.

“You won’t put a stop to this?” I ask the ref.

“If he’s still on his feet, the fight’s still on.” The ref glances at the crowd, which surges around the platform. He lowers his voice. “Do *you* wanna tell them you’re not interested in fighting?”

Frustration pounds through me as I face the pixie. Thankfully, he’s back on his feet. He glares at me and raises his fists.

I drop mine and give him what I hope is an earnest look. “The boxing ring is no place for gentle beings, pixie. Let me fight the Sea Syn—”

“Gentle beings?” he snarls. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Stay vigilant,” Sully says in my mind.

The pixie leaps forward. I seize his throat—a move any decent fighter would have sidestepped. Grunting, I walk the pixie swiftly backward and pin him against the side of the cage. He hits hard, and one of his delicate wings shoves through the chain link and bends at an odd angle. He cries out, his brow creasing with pain even as he shoots me a furious look.

The crowd is restless. Jeers and groans fill the cathedral, echoing off the high ceiling.

Confusion and concern war within me. I love a good fight. But there’s nothing good about what’s happening here. This would be a slaughter if I took it seriously.

Time slows. The pixie claws at my forearm, trying to pry my fingers from around his throat. His pulse pounds underneath my palm. Heat flashes through me as a sudden vision of me fucking him assaults my mind. His brows would be scrunched just as they are now, but in pleasure, not fury. And he wouldn’t be trying to get away. No, he’d be writhing in ecstasy under my larger frame.

I shake my head in an attempt to dispel the vision, but others take their place. Vague, blurry images of bright blue eyes and fluttering wings. Like an old-fashioned film strip, the muddy, disjointed scenes dash through my consciousness. Does the pixie possess some magic to do this? Maybe he’s not a physical fighter, but a mental one.

A quick knee to the groin snaps me back to the moment. Pain and nausea slam into me, but I shake them off as I tighten my grip on the pixie’s neck. His eyes burn with hatred as he scratches and kicks. Suddenly, I don’t feel the hits. They keep coming and I don’t notice.

But every inch of me notices *him*.

The arena around us fades. The pixie’s heart pounds under my fingers. I shake my head again,

trying to clear the morass of confusion from my thoughts. Tower du Sang stands amid the crowd at the base of the platform. The vampire should be as outraged as I am about this imbalanced fight. Instead, his blue eyes brim with the same confusion that pummels me. It's clear he doesn't want me to fight this fight—not against *this* opponent.

Something is wrong here. Very, very wrong.

I drop the pixie's throat and step back. Turning toward the ref, I lift both hands in surrender. "I don't want this fight."

The pixie surges forward. "Fight, you coward! You're not getting away with this!"

I shake my head. "It's not a fair match. I won't do it."

He clenches his fists. Tears sparkle in his eyes as he screams—the sound so frustrated and grief-stricken, something inside me threatens to shatter apart.

"Don't," I say, stepping toward him. My head snaps to the side when he nails me with a quick right hook. My lip bursts and the coppery taste of blood fills my mouth. It was a weak hit despite its accuracy.

I spit blood on the ground and turn to the ref, shaking my head. "I'm finished."

He frowns as he moves between me and the pixie.

The pixie doesn't even look at him.

The ref gives me an impatient look. "You refuse to fight your opponent?"

The pixie stares blindly at the crowd, his chest heaving and his fists balled at his sides. The anguished look on his face makes me want to cradle him to my chest. I can't hit him again. I won't.

I look at the ref. "I won't fight this opponent. I forfeit."

The crowd erupts into thunderous jeers around us. The cage fills with overwhelming noise. The pixie glares at me, his blue eyes glittering with unshed tears.

The ref tosses me a disgruntled look, then grabs one of the pixie's fists and yanks it into the air. "The Sky Syndicate's champion will not fight. The Sea wins!"

A chorus of cheers from those who bet on the Sea fills the room, followed by the groans of those who just lost their bets.

The pixie uses his free hand to scrub the moisture from his eyes. His beautiful wings are stiff, the delicate edges sifting red dust.

The ref drops the pixie's arm and turns to him. "You're the champion. You know the terms. What boon do you claim for yourself as the winner?"

Brilliant blue eyes narrow. Slowly, the pixie looks at me, his expression shifting from despair to sinister glee. "Him," he rasps, pointing at me. "I claim him as my boon."

In my bond, Sully hisses. *"What the fuck is a boon?"*

TEN MINUTES LATER, I TRAIL THE PIXIE DOWN A DARKENED SIDEWALK LEADING AWAY FROM THE cathedral. Sully prowls in the shadows a short distance away. Chilly air coasts over my bare skin, cooling my sweat and making goosebumps race down my arms. The pixie didn't even allow me to change before he ordered me from the cathedral.

"Keep up," he barks, turning and snapping his fingers at me. His glossy black nails flash in the moonlight. "Not much of a boon if I have to fucking carry you."

"I'll ask you again," I say, my breath puffing in white, frosty clouds. "What the hells is a boon?"

The pixie whirls around. He stalks toward me, his fists balled once more. The bass thumping from the cathedral is a fitting accompaniment to the angry pulse throbbing in his neck.

"It means you're mine, Vale," he says. "Try not to run, although not following through on your commitments is par for the fucking course for you."

Confusion hits me, followed by equal doses of dread and anger.

I raise my hands in the same gesture of surrender I used in the cage. "You keep using my name. But I don't know you, and I can't be yours, regardless of what happened at the Brawl. I've got places to be."

My wedding, for instance. In two godsdamned weeks.

The pixie shoots me an incredulous look. "Oh gods, Vale, how inconvenient for you to have"—he makes air quotes with both hands—"places to be!" He shoots a disdainful look at my hands, which are still taped from the fight. "Kept that under your hat, didn't you? I guess when you're a liar, you lie about everything." He turns and stomps down the sidewalk, cursing under his breath.

Frustration joins the brew of confusion and anger. I raise my voice. "Wait! What is a boon?"

He stops and snarls at me over his shoulder. "It's a magical contract. Like it or not, and I don't give a single shit if you like it, you're at my mercy for the next two weeks. Come the fuck on." He turns and moves off again.

My gut clenches. Why the hell didn't Gothel and Tower mention this? I can't be locked into a magical contract for two weeks. My father will expect me home within the next few days. Zaphira is bound to notice my absence from court—or when I don't show up for a fucking cake tasting appointment.

Something pinches my skin—the sting like a rubber band snapping. "Ow!" I jump and examine my arm, expecting to see a welt. But there's nothing. When I look up, the pixie faces me across the length of the sidewalk between us.

"Did I mention the magical contract comes with an enforcement mechanism?" he says with a dark smile. "Move your ass or pay the consequences, Your Highness." He spins and strides away, his long legs eating up the sidewalk.

As I jog to catch up with him, the strangest sense of déjà vu hits me. He seems absolutely convinced that we know one another. But we can't. I'd remember a man like him.

I slow to a walk as I reach his side, and I curl my fingers into my palms to resist the urge to straighten his still-crooked wing. The delicate membrane is a mottled red, and the edges aren't dropping pixie dust like the other wing. The pixie ignores me as we walk, his gaze fastened on some point in the distance.

I've tried demands. Maybe charm will get me some answers.

"You seem to think we've met, pixie," I say, "but I'd remember a face as handsome as yours."

He stops so abruptly that I take another step before stumbling to a halt and facing him.

A disgusted look slips over his refined features. "Are you shitting me?" he asks in a low, dangerous voice.

Okay, so it's a no-go on the charm. "I'm not trying to," I say. "I'm sorry—"

"Shut up," he growls, his blue eyes glittering. Another phantom stinger pinches my skin. "This is what you need to know. You're mine for the next two weeks. When I say jump, the only thing I want to hear out of your mouth is *'How high, Jasper?'*"

I jerk like I just took a punch to the gut, my breath whooshing out of me in a great big wheeze. Dizziness assails me. And it's not because he snapped the rubber band.

Jasper.

The word swirls through me, joining the confusion that fogs my brain. *Jasper.* It circles my mind, and I reach for it but I can't quite catch it. I'm swimming for a shore that keeps getting farther away with every wave. Confusion fills my bond with Sully, who's still trailing us at a distance.

"Vale?" he asks, his mental voice concerned. *"Are you okay?"*

"Jasper?" I croak, my gaze locked with the pixie's as I shove the dizziness away. "That's your name?"

He huffs a disgusted, humorless laugh. Then he turns and heads up the darkened sidewalk once more. This time, he doesn't order me to follow.

But as I watch the stunning pixie move away, I know I *will* follow him. Every instinct I possess urges me to find out more about him. And that devastated look he shot me on the platform? I need to know why it was there. I start forward, my eyes on the pixie's delicate wings as he turns down a shadowy street lined with buildings draped in ivy.

Jasper.

I increase my pace. He shouldn't walk alone through the city. It's not safe. Any number of creatures could be hiding in that ivy. But I don't even *know* him. So why am I worried?

"We have to be back in Paris within two weeks," Sully reminds me. *"We* have *to, Vale."*

"I know, old friend," I say, walking faster. *"That gives us two weeks to figure out what in the seven hells is going on here."*

He purrs into our bond—his version of a quick hug. And then we turn the corner and follow the pixie.

No, *Jasper.*

His name is Jasper.

CHAPTER 9

JASPER

This is stupid. I'm an idiot. A stupid idiot.

Those thoughts pound through my head as I lead Vale up the two flights of stairs to my apartment. What the fuck was I thinking claiming him as a boon? And for two weeks? I could have done a million other things. Could have forced him to crawl around the cathedral shouting what a scheming, lying, cheating asshole he is.

But no, I decided to bring him home with me so I can be reminded what a scheming, lying, cheating asshole he is for *two weeks*. And now he's playing some cruel little game, pretending we've never met.

"Fuck," I mutter, stopping in the middle of the hallway. Vale crashes into me, sending me lurching forward. Just like in Mab's court.

Anger grips me all over again, and I whirl around, ready to punch him in the face. But my wing twinges, pain shooting from the middle of my back to the tip of the membrane. Nausea slams into me, and I suck in a breath.

Vale steps forward, his golden eyes both wary and concerned. "Are you all right?"

"No," I snap. "I'm not *all right*." Wincing, I curl my wing forward and examine the damage in the hallway's electric lights. Just a bruise. It'll be okay by morning.

"You should get someone to look at that," Vale rumbles. He drifts closer, his expression shifting. The wariness in his eyes fades, replaced with curiosity—and interest. Goosebumps cover his skin. His nipples are tight pebbles. December in the Hallows is no joke. He's got to be cold in nothing but those tight little shorts. The damn things are indecent, the fabric cupping his bulge like a second skin.

I flick my wing behind me, and he jerks a startled gaze to mine.

"Why the fuck do you care?" I demand. Then I raise a hand. "Wait, don't answer that. I thought I wanted to hear your excuses, but I've changed my mind." I turn and march to my door. My nape prickles as he moves behind me, drawing close. Gods, even now, my body responds to him. He's like a sickness I've caught and can't shake. A fucking virus.

As I fumble for my key, something thumps two apartments down. Two more thumps echo in rapid succession. A second later, a woman moans. A man's low laugh drifts from the apartment.

"What's that sound?" Vale asks, his breath coasting over my nape. "Intruders?"

I glare at him over my shoulder. "Would you back off? And no, they're not intruders. They're my neighbors."

His brow furrows. "Neighbors?"

"Yeah, not everyone can afford to buy a whole city block, Your Highness." I open the door and let it bounce off the doorstop. My apartment is nowhere near as luxurious as Vale's brownstone in Paris,

but it's wired for old-fashioned human power. I flip on the lights as I toss my keys on the tiny table in my equally tiny foyer before stalking to the kitchen. Vale appears a second later, looking enormous and completely out of place in the modest space.

He gazes around, his golden eyes taking in the glossy cabinets, electric appliances, and exposed brick I was so proud of when I bought the place. In the adjoining living room, glass doors open onto a private terrace. It's the size of a postage stamp but it costs me a fortune. A fireplace with a roomy hearth softens the industrial look of the living room's brick walls.

Vale settles his gaze on me, his expression polite. Impersonal. "Your home is nice."

"It's not quite Villette," I say, my voice heavy with sarcasm.

His face goes from polite to intense. An air of danger rolls off him as he steps toward me. "You know my preferred name. And you know where I make my home."

"No shit." It's on the tip of my tongue to remind him that, for two weeks, his home was my home too. That in my heart of hearts, I dared to hope it might be my permanent home. But I can't bring myself to say it. The words already hurt badly enough living in my head. Sharing them with him will make everything worse. He doesn't deserve to know how I feel. I've already given him too much of myself. I won't give him anything else.

"How do you know these things?" he asks, his eyes darkening as he takes another step forward.

Anger boils up—the bubbling rage as hot as it was the moment I spotted him at the Ball. It tightens my chest and turns my voice into a growl. "I don't know what you're playing at, but you've got a lot of fucking nerve."

A deep groove appears between his brows. "I don't understand why you're so angry with me." He gestures to my injured wing. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Really?" I prop my fists on my hips. "You're really going there? Because from where I'm standing, you definitely meant to hurt me."

"I swear I didn't." His lips thin. "In my defense, you had no business being on that platform—"

"I'm not talking about the fucking platform!" I yell, my temper snapping. I rush him, and he takes a swift step backward, bumping into my refrigerator. "What is this act you're putting on?" I demand. "Is this some kind of trick?"

"No trick," he says, "just…" He trails off—and goes as green as Bert after a night of partying. Sweat beads on Vale's forehead as his breathing grows more labored. He leans against the fridge and lifts a shaking hand to his brow.

Alarm jumps through me. "Are you gonna pass out?"

"No," he rasps, looking like he's definitely going to pass out. "I'm fine." He lowers his hand and studies me like he's trying to see through me. "But it's like I've heard that"—he sways on his feet—"before," he finishes weakly.

"Okay, come on." I grab his arm and steer him toward the living room. Or try to. I take one step and come up short when Vale doesn't move. He just stares down at me with bewilderment in his eyes.

And touching him is the very last thing I should be doing. What I *should* do is end this conversation and go to bed. I'll figure out a way to dissolve the boon in the morning.

I drop his arm and tap the contract's bond as I point toward the living room. "Go sit on the sofa. I'm not scooping you off the floor if you keel over in my kitchen."

He grimaces as the magic hits him. Scowling, he reaches the sofa in half a dozen steps and sits down hard. Even in nothing but his ridiculous shorts, he's every inch a prince. With quick movements, he unwinds the tape from his hands and wads it into little balls.

I swallow hard and ignore the tendrils of desire that try to bloom inside me. He's an elf and an

asshole. And now he's determined to gaslight me into thinking we're strangers. I need to keep my distance, both figuratively and literally.

He looks up at me. "I can't be part of this boon, Jasper. I have obligations to attend to. People are depending on me."

"Since when has that ever stopped you from being an utter disappointment?" My resolve of five seconds ago flies out the window as I round the end of the counter and cross the living room. I stop on the other side of the coffee table stacked with art books. A blown glass bowl holds a collection of seashells a siren queen gave me after I helped her patch things up with her girlfriend.

Bitterness washes through me. Is that the price of my gift? I can bring other people together, but I can't figure out relationships for myself? Somehow, that magic is beyond my grasp.

Vale watches me, his big hands braced on his knees. He looks so fucking good. I hoped to never see him again, but if I did, I thought maybe he'd look less stunning—that maybe my memories painted him in a better light than reality. But he's just as gorgeous now as he was in Paris. Just as ruggedly masculine. Just a little too rough around the edges to be a typical elf. Golden scruff covers his square jaw. The sun tattoo flares down his broad chest and over his rippling abs before disappearing beneath the waistband of his shorts. Honey-brown curls spread over his plump pecs. When we lay in bed, I used to trail my fingers through those curls.

My throat tightens.

Vale rises, worry in his gaze. "Jasper—"

"Don't." I scrub the heel of my hand over my eye. "I don't want to hear my name on your lips." In my peripheral vision, red dust sifts from my uninjured wing. "I don't want to hear anything you have to say. So sit down and shut up."

His nostrils flare as he obeys. "No one speaks to me this way."

"Maybe that's your problem. You've always gotten exactly what you want."

He gives a bitter-sounding laugh. "Is that so? Apparently, you don't know everything, pixie."

"Oh, I know plenty. You—" I clamp my mouth shut as the sound of light, rapid footsteps drifts from the terrace. A second later, Bert and Mert scurry through the mousehole at the base of the brick. They spot Vale and freeze.

"You brought a man home?" Mert asks in my head, mild surprise in his voice. Maybe because I haven't brought a man home since I returned from Paris.

Bert looks from Vale to me. His dark eyes are worried, but he stays silent in my mind. Our new normal. For the past eight months, it's like we've had an unspoken pact to never speak of Vale.

"Jasper?" Mert says, running to me and scratching at my foot. I bend and pick him up. He jumps from my palm to my shoulder and rubs his cheek against mine. *"What's wrong?"*

"Nothing," I rasp aloud, stroking his short whiskers. Plump and jolly, Mert has always been softer than his twin. Sweeter. But I can't handle sweet right now. If Mert is nice to me, I'll break down. I clear my throat. "Where is Luke?"

"Pub in the Earth Syndicate." Mert flicks his tail in Vale's direction. *"Who's the hunk? You pick him up at the Ball?"*

I look at Bert as confusion spreads through me. He and Mert are as close as any brothers. Closer, even. They share everything. But Mert doesn't have the slightest inkling who Vale might be. It's almost like he and Bert never discussed Paris.

"You want some privacy?" Mert asks. *"Bert and I can get lost."*

"No," I answer through our bond, but I keep my gaze on Bert, who gives no reaction despite hearing every word of our conversation. A frown pulls at my brow as I stare him down. *"What*

gives?"

Bert lifts a tiny shoulder. *"What?"*

I release an exasperated breath as I jerk my head toward Vale. *"You've got nothing to say?"*

"I..." His whiskers twitch as hesitation travels across our bond. After a second, he turns toward the mousehole. *"I'm going to my room."*

Mert's bafflement is a cloud in my mind. *"Bert?"*

Vale stands. "Listen, Jasper. I don't know what happened back at the fight, but I can't stress enough how critical it is for me to return home immediately." His chest lifts as he draws a deep breath. "I'm betrothed, you see, and—"

"Are you?" I press my palm to my chest and widen my eyes dramatically. "Gods, I had no idea. If only someone thought to plaster you and your fiancée's faces on every billboard and building on two continents. Have you considered wedding announcements? Maybe some flyers with fancy gold lettering?" I fling my arms wide, jostling Mert. "I know! You and *Princess Liriel* could face each other so it looks like you're gazing into each other's eyes."

His scowl returns with lightning speed. "You're mocking me."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of it, m'lord."

He opens his mouth—

Someone knocks on the door.

We both turn toward the foyer. My gut clenches as memories from that last morning in Paris flood my head. When the knock rings out again, I look at Vale and let every ounce of anger I've collected over the past eight months fill my expression.

"One of your people come to fetch you?"

His golden eyes, which were always so soft for me, go hard. "I have no idea. Maybe you should answer it."

I point at him. "Don't fucking move."

He clenches his fists at his sides but stays put as I head to the foyer.

"Jasper," Mert says carefully in my head, *"do you want to tell me what's going on?"*

"Not right now." I reach the door as a third knock vibrates the wood. The peephole reveals nothing but an empty hallway. But that doesn't mean anything. Several Myth creatures can cloak themselves for short periods of time.

"Fuck," I mutter.

"Maybe get the hunk to open it," Mert suggests.

The knock shakes the door again, followed by a low-pitched yowl. Mert and I look at each other.

"It's a cat," he whispers in my head. *"Don't open it."*

I pluck him from my shoulder and lower him to the ground. *"Go find Bert."*

"Jasper!"

The door rattles.

"Go," I say aloud.

Another yowl—more demanding this time.

"Fucking cat," I mutter. Straightening, I unlock the door and wrench it open. "You're as rude as your—"

Sully streaks past me in a blur of black fur and disappears into the apartment.

"—master," I finish darkly. I slam the door and stalk to the living room, where Sully weaves in and out of Vale's legs.

I fold my arms and thrust my chin toward Sully. "He can't stay. I'm allergic to cats."

Vale frowns. “No, you’re not.” He winces and clutches at his head. “Shit.”

Sully rears up and plants his front paws on Vale’s hip. The creature’s golden eyes fill with concern as he buries his nose in Vale’s ribs.

“I’m okay,” Vale rasps, rubbing the top of the cat’s head. *“Un petit mal de tête.”*

The murmured French hits me squarely in the gut—a sucker punch that steals my breath more forcefully than any blow. *Just a little headache.* The words don’t hurt. But hearing his voice curl around those romantic syllables is a fist to my solar plexus. Tears burn my throat.

Which makes everything worse. I reach for the anger, letting it burn away the regret and sorrow. Letting it sharpen my voice as I glare at Vale and Sully.

“The cat can’t stay here. He’ll scare my mice.”

Vale rests a protective hand on Sully’s head. “Sulien is my familiar. We’re never parted.”

“This will be a new experience for you, then.” I look at Sully. “Get the fuck out.”

“Don’t speak to him that way,” Vale says.

My anger flares higher. I jerk my thumb toward my chest. “This is *my* apartment, dick face. And your stupid cat isn’t welcome.”

Vale growls as he steps around the coffee table. “You have a filthy mouth, pixie.”

I step backward. “You have no idea, *elf*.”

In a blink, he pins me against the wall, his fingers tight on my throat. Brick digs into my back as six-and-a-half feet of furious elven prince stares down at me. His eyes are like chips of amber. His hot breath tickles my cheek as he bares his fangs.

“I’ve had enough of your insults,” he growls.

My voice is a hiss as I let my gaze sear his. “No, you haven’t. Not nearly enough, Vale Gentry. Not after what you—” I gag as my throat tightens.

Vale quickly moves his hand from my throat to the wall next to my head. But he doesn’t move away. Slowly, the anger in his eyes fades. Bewilderment takes its place. “What I…?” He looks at my mouth, and his voice goes soft. “What did I do?”

A spell descends. My breath hitches. Sunshine and fresh-cut grass invade my lungs. Gods, his scent. *Summer.* It’s cold outside, but the winter can’t touch me. Not with Vale’s body heat caressing my skin. Not with his golden stare locked on my mouth. Lust streaks to my dick.

“S-Stop,” I whisper, unsure if I’m pleading with myself or Vale.

His dark lashes flutter as he drags his gaze up. Confusion and naked desire mingle in his eyes. “I can’t,” he whispers back. “You…” Beside my head, his hand curls into a fist. His lips part, and he frowns like he’s concentrating hard. “Jasper,” he rasps. “I feel like I know you from somewhere.”

The spell breaks. With strength borne of fury, I shove him hard. He stumbles back, and surprise registers on his face for a fraction of a second before he recovers and comes at me again.

“No!” I shout, thrusting a hand out as I yank on the contract, snapping our bond and making him grunt. “Don’t touch me!”

Vale stops. But he doesn’t like it. His chest heaves, and a growl rumbles in his throat. Sully stands just behind him. The cat’s black fur is lifted. His tail whips back and forth as he stares at me like he wants to take a bite. I can’t speak to him. Elven familiar bonds are too personal. But it’s clear from the look in Sully’s eyes that there’s no getting him out of the apartment.

I flick my wings, hiding a wince as the left one twinges. “You’ll sleep on the sofa,” I tell Vale. I let acid lace my tone as I tilt my head. “Or maybe you’d prefer the closet? I have a nice, big one you could hide in. Since that’s where you’re most comfortable.”

Vale sucks in a breath.

"Did I strike a nerve?" I go to the hallway that leads to my bedroom. Vale is a silent, fuming presence as I pull blankets and a pillow from a linen closet. He watches with glittering eyes as I return to the living room and dump the bedding on the sofa next to him.

I yank hard on the contract, and Vale gasps before clenching his jaw.

"Don't leave the sofa tonight," I say. "If your cat bothers my mice, I'll hex him into the demon plane." I whirl and go to my bedroom, slamming the door hard enough to shake the pictures on the walls.

I give my bathroom door the same treatment. Then I crank the heat in the shower and strip without looking at myself in the mirror. I step into the shower and let the spray pound over my face.

When the tears come, the water washes them down the drain.

I OPEN MY EYES AND IMMEDIATELY CURSE WHEN SUNLIGHT BLINDS ME.

"Go the fuck away," I mumble, squeezing my eyes shut. I fumble for the nearest pillow and press it over my face, blocking out the sun. It can't be morning already. I just shut my eyes.

Knocking drifts into the bedroom. Someone is at the front door.

A sigh builds in my chest. It's probably Horatio from two doors down. If he had a girl in his apartment last night, he almost certainly wants to talk about her. Satyrs have a reputation for playing fast and loose with romance, but they're actually—

I bolt upright, the pillow plopping into my lap as the events from the Syndicate Ball flood my head, clearing the fog of sleep. Morning sunlight pours through the window and splashes across my bed.

Vale.

My throat goes tight as I stare at my bedroom door.

Vale is out there. In my living room. On my fucking sofa.

More knocking—staccato raps guaranteed to piss off my neighbors. The witch down the hall once turned a delivery man into a toad and refused to change him back until he agreed to bring her free pizza for six months.

The knocking grows more insistent. Vale's deep voice rumbles through the door. His words are unintelligible but his tone is reassuring. Anger burns my chest. He's probably talking to Sully. He never speaks harshly to his precious cat.

The raps turn into heavy thuds. *Boom, boom, boom.*

Swearing, I fling the covers back and stride for the door. Halfway there, I scoop a pair of sweats from the floor and pull them on. My wing is better this morning, the pain faded to a barely-there ache.

The thuds continue as I leave the bedroom and make my way to the foyer, ignoring Vale and his rumpled, sexy bedhead. A pillow mark creases his cheek.

Fuck.

I yank the door open without looking through the peephole.

Izig freezes mid-knock. His dark, three-piece suit is impeccable as always. A matching bowler hat sits on his head, the sides supported by his rounded green ears.

He lowers his hand and gives me a curt nod. "I'm Izig. I serve Prince Vale of the Summer Court."

"I know who you are," I say tersely. Fucking tears burn my throat. I sniff. "What do you want?"

He blinks rapidly, confusion covering his squat, bulbous features. Then he gives his head a little

shake as if he means to clear it. “I’m here to collect the prince.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Well, too fucking bad.”

The ogre narrows his gaze, compressing the tiny warts around his eyes. To ogres, warts are a mark of great beauty. Izig is probably a Casanova among his people.

Right now, though, he looks like he wants to murder me. He glances at my wings, and his tone drops an octave. “Pixies are mischievous creatures.”

A door down the hall opens, and a woman with frizzy black-and-purple hair pokes her head out. “Jasper? Are you causing this racket?”

“Sorry, Lydia!” I call, forcing a smile. “We’ll keep it down.”

She slants a look at Izig. “Did someone say prince?”

Another door opens, and a second woman sticks her head out. Snakes writhe among her pink curlers. “Prince?” She looks over her shoulder and shouts at someone inside her apartment. “Herman! We’ve got royalty visiting!”

“There’s no royalty,” I say through clenched teeth.

Lydia’s eyes flash as purple as her hair. “The troll said prince. I heard it with my own ears.”

Izig growls as he rounds on her. “I beg your pardon, madam. I am an *ogre*.”

The witch looks him up and down. “Well, you look like a troll.”

“Perhaps you should have your eyes checked.”

She steps into the hall and cracks her knuckles. “Perhaps *you* should check your attitude.”

“Izig?” Vale says behind me.

I whirl and bump into his chest. “What the fuck are you doing?” I hiss. “I told you not to leave the sofa.”

Golden eyes gleam with triumph. “You told me not to leave the sofa *tonight*. As in, last night. Words matter, pixie.”

I draw myself up. “How dare you—”

“Where’s this prince?” a man’s voice demands, followed by the clatter of hooves. “I wanna get a look at ‘im.”

Spinning, I grab Izig by the lapel and yank him into the apartment. Just as Horatio appears in the doorway, I slam the door and throw the deadbolt.

A chorus of disappointed groans drifts through the door.

“There’s no prince!” I shout. Then I turn to a stunned-looking Izig and Vale and speak just above a whisper. “Unless the two of you want to get up close and personal with my neighbor’s erect cock, you’ll shut up and go to the living room!”

Izig and Vale exchange a look. As one, they turn and do my bidding. For a second, I sag in place, one ear cocked for noise from the hallway. When it stays quiet, I straighten and go to the living room.

Vale, Izig, and Sully stand in a clump by the sofa. Bert, Mert, and a confused-looking Luke perch on the edge of a glass-topped bureau. The two groups stare at each other like a bunch of ancient humans in the Wild Wild West.

I stop in the doorway. “Well, this is cheery. Should I fetch a tumbleweed?”

Luke turns to me. *“Did I miss something?”* he asks in my head.

“You have no idea.”

He casts a wary look toward Sully. *“I don’t like the cat.”*

“Neither do I,” I say out loud.

Izig glances toward the foyer. “Does your neighbor really walk about with his, uh, member exposed?”

I raise a brow. "You haven't spent much time around satyrs, have you?"

The ogre grunts, his cheeks growing pink under his green-hued skin. "Unseemly," he mutters to himself.

"Jasper," Vale says, stepping forward. The damn shorts look even tighter in the light of day. "You must release me from this contract. I know you feel that I've somehow wronged you, but—"

"I don't *feel* it," I say, frustration sharpening my voice. "I know it. I know what happened in Paris —" Pressure builds in my chest, choking off my words. More frustration follows, and I drag in a breath as I fling a hand toward Izig and Sully. "Ask your entourage, Your Highness." I wheeze, dizziness swamping me as I fight to spit the accusation from my mouth. The room spins, and I brace a hand against the brick wall. "They…were…there."

"Jasper!" Mert's voice echoes in my head. Suddenly, he and the others sit at my feet, their dark eyes worried.

"Allow me," a deep voice says, the sound coming from far away. Golden eyes swim in my vision, and then someone lifts me. The scent of grass fills my lungs.

Vale. I must say his name aloud, because his chest rumbles against my side.

"Easy, Jasper. You need to lie down."

"Don't," I croak. Gods, I can't let him carry me to bed. Of all the cruel things he's said and done over the past twelve or so hours, this is the worst. But I'm helpless as he shoulders his way into my bedroom and settles me on the mattress.

As he straightens, I drag air into my lungs. He stands above me, haloed in sunlight. So beautiful. A beautiful liar hellbent on convincing me we've never met.

"Why?" I gasp. "Why are you…?" My throat burns. More frustration punches through me, and I squeeze my eyes shut to block out the elven prince who refuses to stay out of my life even as he refuses to acknowledge being part of it.

The bed dips, and I open my eyes to find him frowning down at me.

"What are you doing?" I breathe.

"You're ill," he says softly.

"No, I'm not. I just hate you."

His lips twitch.

"I do," I insist. As the pressure in my chest fades, I put my forearm over my eyes and sigh. "Please go away."

"Not until I know you're well."

I pull my arm down. "Are you for real?"

"I…" An exasperated look flits through his eyes. "Yes?"

"Not literally. I meant…" I sigh. "Fuck it, I don't know what I meant." I flick a hand toward the door. "You can go. I don't like you in my room."

His lips twitch again. This time, the humor spreads to his eyes. "You're a very bossy pixie, Jasper." Abruptly, he drops his gaze to my chest. My *bare* chest. I didn't bother with a shirt, and my gray sweatpants don't offer much coverage. Right on cue, my dick decides it's perfectly fine with a half-naked Vale Gentry perched on the edge of my bed.

Vale's gaze travels down my body. The pulse in the hollow of his throat flutters faster.

My pulse picks up, too. "Stop looking at me," I say, my voice rough in my ears.

He lifts heated eyes to mine. "I can't."

Izig appears in the bedroom doorway. His dark eyes move from Vale to me and back again. "Sire, we can't linger in the Hallows. Your duties—"

"I'm aware of them," Vale says sharply. He rises and gazes down at me, his expression…bereft. "I…"

"Yes?" I ask cautiously, sitting up. Something like hope flutters at the edges of my mind. "What is it?"

He swallows. Then he shakes himself. "I have to go home. I can't miss this wedding. Liriel is waiting—" He sucks in a breath as I launch myself from the bed. Flapping my wings hard, I soar to the opposite side of the room and land as far away from him as I can get.

"Ah, yes," I snap, "your future *wife*." A bitter laugh spills from me. "How convenient for you to remember her just now."

Vale furrows his brow. And suddenly, I've had just about enough of that stupid, bewildered expression.

"Get out," I order, pointing toward the living room. Wicked inspiration strikes, and I tug on the bond I so recklessly set between us. "Go make yourself useful for once. The cleaning supplies are under the kitchen sink. Clean the whole apartment, Your Highness. Do a *merveilleux* job."

"Un travail merveilleux," he says quietly, correcting my Franglish.

"OUT!" I jab my finger toward the door.

Vale tosses me a scathing look as he goes. Anger flows off him. Abruptly, the sun blazes through the window, the rays so bright I throw up a hand and squint.

"And don't use your power!" I add.

Izig steps aside as Vale stalks past him.

The sun dims. The temperature in the bedroom plunges several degrees.

In the doorway, Izig holds my stare for a moment. Then he pulls the door shut, the hushed *snick* louder than a slam.

CHAPTER 10

VALE

I stand outside Jasper's room with confusion scrambling my thoughts. I wanted one last taste of freedom before the wedding. Instead, I find myself locked into a magical contract with a furious pixie who acts like he knows me.

He can't possibly know me. Can he?

A wave of vertigo crashes over me, and the hallway goes sideways.

Izig clamps a hand on my shoulder. "Sir? Is everything okay?"

"Fine," I rasp, swallowing the nausea that rises up my throat. "I'm fine." I turn toward the living room.

Izig keeps a hand on my shoulder as he guides me down the short hallway. By the time we reach the living room, the dizziness recedes enough for me to wave off his help.

"Thanks," I say. "I'm better."

His dark-green brows form a vee between equally dark eyes. "What's going on here, sir? We have to return home soon."

"I know." I rub at my forehead, where a headache lingers.

Sully prowls from the kitchen, his tail lashing from side to side.

I glance in the direction of Jasper's bedroom. *"You didn't eat any mice, did you?"*

Sully gives me a look as he jumps onto the coffee table and pushes books around to make a comfortable spot for himself. *"Please. I have higher standards than that."*

Izig crosses his arms over his broad chest. "What's this contract you spoke to the pixie about?"

Grimacing, I lower my voice and relay last night's events, starting with facing Jasper on the platform and ending with him ordering me to clean. "So I'm stuck," I finish. "Worse, I have to do everything Jasper says. I'm tethered to him somehow. I know it sounds crazy."

Izig grunts. "Sounds like the consequences of your actions. How many times have I told you brawling was going to get you into trouble?"

A growl rumbles from me. "You overstep, Izig." When he pales under his green-tinged skin, guilt rises. I've never been one to lord my authority over my household. I won't do it now just because I'm frustrated. "You've told me at least two thousand times, old friend," I tack on more gently. "And I should have listened."

Sully leans forward and runs his whiskers over my bare leg. I reach down and scratch absently between his ears.

Izig's brow furrows as he stares at the hallway leading to Jasper's bedroom. He turns his gaze back to me. "I don't understand. Who is this pixie?"

"You don't know?"

My butler frowns. “No. Should I?”

Exasperation swells in my chest as I shove a hand through my hair. “He acts like you should. Like *I* should. And he’s furious.”

“I noticed,” Izig mutters. He looks at the rumpled sofa. “You spent the night here. Did you and he __”

“No,” I say quickly. “Nothing like that.” Even as I say it, an ache blossoms within me.

No, not an ache. Longing.

“You’re certain you can’t get out of this contract?” Izig asks.

“I was hoping you’d know of a way.”

He grunts. “If I did, I would have already told you.”

I rub a hand over my mouth. “Shit.”

He hesitates.

I lower my hand. “What?”

“Nothing.” He waits a beat. “It’s just that the pixie mentioned Paris. And the more I think about it, maybe he *does* seem familiar. But I—” He doubles over and clutches at his stomach.

I grab his shoulder, worry replacing my anger. “What’s wrong?”

Izig grunts and straightens, his face a mask of discomfort. “Just nauseated, sire. It hit me out of nowhere. Must be something I ate.”

“Or maybe something in the contract,” I mutter.

Sully jumps down from the table and rubs his flank along Izig’s starched pant legs. I hide a smile at the thought of Izig taking a lint roller to them later. As they both look up at me, I school my features into a confident expression I’m not quite sure I feel.

“I’ll think of a way out of this, don’t worry. In the meantime, I’ll clean like Jasper ordered. Maybe it’ll put him in a better mood, and we can talk about the contract without it dissolving into an argument.” My mind helpfully supplies me with a vision of Jasper on his bed, his dick tenting the front of his sweatpants.

I shove the image from my head and go to the kitchen, where I squat in front of the sink and open the cabinet. The scent of bleach fills my nose. A stack of sponges sits next to a variety of bottles filled with brightly colored liquid. “How much cleaning does he do?” I murmur, letting my gaze roam the options.

Blue.

Blue is a clean color, right?

Grabbing a sponge and the blue bottle, I stand and nudge the cabinet shut with my foot.

In the living room, Izig shakes his head. “That’s oven cleaner, sir.” He moves into the kitchen and extends his hand. “Allow me to help.”

I hold the bottle of cleaner against my chest. “Jasper commanded me, Izig. And it wouldn’t surprise me if he objected to your help. I don’t want to give him any further reason to argue.”

Izig nods, but reluctance is stamped all over his face. “At least let me ensure you don’t harm yourself, sir.” He casts a wary look at the hallway leading to Jasper’s bedroom. “Or the pixie’s upholstery.”

I stand back so Izig can kneel before the cabinet. He rummages for a moment, then rises with a big bottle of purple liquid in his hand. “This should do the job.”

I eye the bottle. “Are you sure? There’s a skull and crossbones on the side.”

Izig’s expression turns mild. “Do you want to kill the germs or play with them, sir?”

Despite the circumstances, I manage a smile. “I bow to your expertise,” I say, taking the bottle

from him.

"There's a first time for everything," he murmurs.

The smile tugs harder at my mouth. I tip my head toward the refrigerator. "You and Sully haven't had breakfast. There's bound to be something edible in there. Go eat on the terrace. I'll take care of things in here."

"You haven't eaten, either," Izig says.

"I'm not hungry."

Doubt shades his eyes. "If you're certain…"

"Oui. Je suis certain." Yes. I'm certain.

Izig's slight smile mirrors my own. *"D'accord,"* he says softly. All right. He finds a plate of scones in the fridge and carries them to the terrace. Sully looks at me like he wants to argue, but I nudge him through our bond, and he follows Izig.

Alone in Jasper's kitchen, I let my gaze stray to the hallway. Nothing but a few steps and a bedroom door separate us. I could walk into his room and demand answers. Insist that he break this silly contract. But he seems determined to punish me. Judging from the intensity of his anger, he believes I hurt him terribly. His fury is by turns absurd and heart-wrenching. It kindles my own anger, but it also draws me.

And it's no wonder. The pixie is captivating. Under other circumstances, I'd do whatever it takes to—

A fresh wave of nausea makes me grip the edge of the counter. Saliva fills my mouth as I take deep breaths and will the sickness to go away. Probably, I should have eaten with Izig and Sully. But I'm not sure I can keep anything down. Puking on Jasper's floor is unlikely to convince him to see reason.

Sighing, I spray lavender-scented cleaner on the countertop and wipe it down. A crashing sound comes from Jasper's room, followed by a curse. I stare into the hallway for a moment before misting the sink.

Another crash. Another muffled curse.

I go to Jasper's door and rap it with the back of my knuckles. "Everything alright?"

Jasper's loud, irritated-sounding sigh drifts through the door. "Everything's fine. Are you cleaning?"

I bite back the angry retort that springs to my tongue. "Yes." I put my ear to the door. "What's going on in there?"

Feet stomp toward me. I back up just as the swings open and Jasper appears, his wings fluttering rapidly at his back. One is still slightly bent and stained a dark color.

"I see you're busy cleaning," he says in a tone thick with sarcasm.

"What are you doing in here?" I lean to the side so I can look past him. A heavy wardrobe partially blocks the window.

"Nothing," he says, shifting to obscure my view of the bedroom. "What do you want?" He flicks his wings behind him in an irritated gesture—and doesn't quite hide his wince.

"Your wing," I murmur. I bend and set the cleaner on the floor. Jasper narrows his eyes when I straighten and reach for his wing.

He jerks it out of range. "Don't touch that."

"It's still bent."

"It's just bruised."

"Yes, but—"

"I'm not interested in your opinion on my wing, Vale." His voice is dismissive and cold—the same tone Zaphira regularly uses with me. *Your father will never know, Abelin.*

The memory of my stepmother's voice makes my headache pound harder, the pain blossoming into a migraine. What will my father never know?

Icicles on the ceiling.

Blood on marble.

Ybris slithering across the floor.

A window covered with drapes that block out the sun.

"Why are you staring?"

Jasper's question yanks me from my thoughts.

My heart thumps as I hold his gaze. "You reminded me of someone for a moment," I say after a second. "Someone back home."

"Ah, so you're a giant asshole there, too?" His mouth goes tight. "What a shock."

My head fills with visions of collaring his pretty throat and pressing him hard to the door. We're both soaked with rain, his clothing translucent from it. He teases me with a sultry pout, his eyes hooded with desire.

I swallow hard as my dick presses painfully against the front of my shorts.

Jasper tenses.

The air shifts, energy crackling in the scant space between us.

"Jasper." My voice is rough. He's so beautifully tempting—even if he hates me for some reason.

His blue gaze bores into mine. His scowl fades as his lashes flutter. When his plump lips part, I imagine feeding my cock between them. He's—

"Stop looking at me like that," he whispers.

"Like what?"

"Like you're interested."

His words are a punch to the gut.

"I find you entrancing," I say, bringing my hand to rest on the doorframe. "Enchanting. Fascinating. I don't want to fight with you, Jasper."

His scowl snaps back into place. He jerks his head toward the living room. "Floor needs mopping. Start there. I'll supervise." He shoves past me and goes to the living room. When I enter a second later, he's seated on the sofa.

Sully pokes his head inside from the terrace. He eyes Jasper before speaking through our bond. *"Looks like it's going well."*

I grit my teeth. *"I'm handling it."*

Jasper plucks a book from the coffee table and begins flipping through the pages. "Mop's in the closet next to the fridge."

Anger sparks in my veins. "I don't—" The bond snaps sharply in my chest, yanking me sideways. I stagger, then right myself and glare at Jasper.

A wicked smile spreads on his face as he continues flipping pages. "Get moving, Your Highness," he says without looking up.

Reining in my anger, I go to the closet.

Ten awkward minutes later, I wring the mop out under Jasper's watchful supervision. He examines his nails, reads his book, does anything to avoid my gaze. But the moment I don't clean something well enough, he's quick to point it out. Izig and Sully watch quietly from the terrace doorway.

"Missed a spot," Jasper says for the hundredth time, pointing to an invisible speck of dust on the floor.

Clenching my jaw, I go to it and swish the mop over the hardwood. Sully wanders in from the terrace and hops onto the coffee table. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as he and Jasper engage in a lengthy staring contest. The moment Jasper lowers his gaze to his book, Sully slowly reaches out a paw and pushes one of the other books off the table.

Jasper jerks his head up and glares at my familiar. Sully blinks at him with a lazy expression.

"Sulien…" I warn through our bond.

"It was in my way," he replies.

"You're not helping."

He folds his paws under him atop the stack of books and purrs loudly, his eyes sliding shut. *"The pixie is mistreating you."*

Still glaring at Sully, Jasper licks his finger and turns a page.

"Let me deal with him," I say, returning to my mopping. I lose track of time as I perform the repetitive chore: mop, wring out dirty water, mop, wring out dirty water. On and on it goes, until my back aches and sweat prickles under my arms. But I have to admit the floor looks nice. The hardwood gleams, and the scent of lemon cleaner fills the air. I lean on the mop and take a second to admire it.

"Missed a spot," Jasper calls.

I stab the mop into the bucket and face him. "I'm done. This is ridiculous. I hoped you'd cool down and we could talk about this contract."

He quickly schools a surprised look into a now-familiar scowl. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Tell me why you think you know me." My head throbs, but I ignore it. "Tell me how you know where I live. What's going on?" Frustration laces my tone as my voice rises.

Jasper jumps to his feet and stalks toward me. But he slips on the wet floor and loses his balance. I spring forward as he windmills his arms, and we crash into each other and start to fall. Instinct kicks in, and I spin us at the last second so I can take the brunt of the impact on my back. Jasper sprawls on top of me, his lithe body pressed to mine from shoulder to thigh. Our legs tangle together. The tip of his bruised wing flutters next to my head.

And his deep blue eyes blink an inch from mine. His breath flutters over my lips.

Time slows. For a moment, we gaze at each other, neither of us moving. His hips press into mine. And he's hard.

That makes two of us.

A groan rises in my throat. My hips lift of their own accord, my erection brushing his.

His nostrils flare. He shoves against my chest, trying to push away.

I tighten my arms, trapping him against me. When he groans and rocks his hips against mine, lust fires hot under my skin. Before I can think better of it, I run a hand down his side and up under his shirt.

Because I *need* to feel him. As my palm touches his smooth, warm skin, a moan rips from me.

Home. He's like coming *home*.

"What are you doing?" He's stiff in my arms, but he doesn't try to move off me.

"Keeping you from busting your ass," I murmur, staring at his mouth. He doesn't have fangs like mine, but his white teeth look sharp enough. He could inflict some damage with his bite…but it would be worth it if he followed it up with a kiss from those pouty, soft-looking lips.

"What do you taste like?" I whisper, blood pounding to my cock.

He jolts in my arms. "As if you don't already know, you ass—"

His insult cuts off as I grip his throat and roll us so he's pinned beneath me. As anger flashes in his eyes, I move my hand to the hardwood beside his head. I give him my full weight, and he makes a strangled, needy sound as our hips meet again.

He shoves against my chest, but I cover one of his hands with mine. I guide it along my pec, dragging his warm palm over my sun tattoo. When he sucks in a breath, I rise to my knees between his spread legs and move his hand lower, trailing it down the dips and curves of my abs. As he traces the rays that fan across my stomach, fury fades from his expression.

Something darker replaces it. Something hungry and needy. Something that calls to my primal instinct to hunt, chase, and conquer.

I grab his other hand and place it beside the first, relishing the feel of his slim fingers exploring and touching me.

"You feel good," I grit out. "Perfect."

His eyes darken to sapphire.

"I want to kiss you," I say.

A pained look replaces the hunger. He nips at his lower lip. His eyes fill with tears.

Something shatters in my chest. It's like I'm a poisoned drink of water, and he's dying of thirst but knows better than to drink from me.

I bring his hands together and hold them over my heart. "How did I hurt you?" Pain lances my skull, and I suck in a sharp breath as I fight to ignore it. "Tell me, please. I can't stand the way you're looking at me."

"How am I looking at you?" he asks, his voice thick with tears.

"Like I'm the source of all that's wrong in your world."

Pain fills his eyes, the blue depths as bruised as his wing. The bluster and snark are gone, replaced with hurt so deep it reaches into my chest and squeezes my heart.

"Please tell me that's not true," I say.

"Vale, how can you ask that of me when you insist on pretending we—" His words end in a choked gurgle. He clamps his jaw shut, grief and a spark of fear in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" I demand, leaning over him and bringing the back of my hand to his forehead. "Are you hurt?"

He pushes my hand away. "You hurt me every second you're here."

My gut clenches. Unable to help myself, I stroke a lock of platinum hair away from his face. "Don't say that."

The pointed tip of his ear shivers. "I'm so stupid," he murmurs as if talking to himself.

The hint of sass in his voice makes it hard not to smile. For all his glares and hateful comments, something tells me he's not as prickly as he seems. The second the thought materializes, déjà vu slams into me, stealing my breath.

"No, you're not," I say, *knowing* it's true. "You're stunning, and I can't stop looking at you."

Jasper swats my hand away. "Stop, Vale. Just stop it. Don't fucking say that shit!" When I reach for him again, he shoves my chest hard. "Don't touch me!"

Confusion pummels me. I shift backward, pain lancing through me as he flits to his feet.

"Help me understand," I plead, standing and following as he moves toward his bedroom. "How did I hurt you, Jasper? Tell me!"

He rounds on me with wide eyes. "How *didn't* you hurt me? You—" He grits his teeth, and his face goes red like he's struggling to get the words out. Like he's too furious to speak. Then he drags in a big breath and speaks in a rush. "You broke me in Paris. And now you're rubbing salt in the

wound.” He strides to his room and slams the door.

Izig and Sully are frozen in the terrace doorway.

I stare at Jasper’s door. Then I grab the mop, stalk to the kitchen, and dump the dirty water.

I don’t know how to fix this. I don’t know if I even can.

How did I break a man I’ve never met?

And why do I feel shattered into a million pieces, too?

CHAPTER II

JASPER

I spend the rest of the day in my bedroom—and I *don't* listen for every little sound that comes from the living room. I don't think about elven princes or their mind games. I pay no attention to the murmur of masculine voices, and I don't strain for the deeper one—that soft, velvet rumble that streaks straight to my dick.

"Fuck," I whisper, my elbows on the balcony railing outside my bedroom. The terrace extends the full length of my apartment. Yet another reason I pay a small fortune for the privilege of living here.

I'm thankful for it now as I watch the sun sink behind the Old Manhattan skyline. *Good. Go away.* Snowflakes drift through the air. Gray clouds hover in the sky, the threat of a storm hanging like a weight over the city. The railing is icy through the sleeves of the thin shirt I put on after my cold shower—which I definitely did not take to cool the lust I felt after falling on top of a certain lying asshole.

Bert runs along the railing, his steps sure and quick. He leaps onto my shoulder and stares at the setting sun.

"Nice of you to show up," I say through our bond.

He stiffens. *"Did I go somewhere?"*

I put a hand to my shoulder so he can climb onto it. Turning from the railing, I lower him to a nearby table. *"You haven't said a word about Vale."* Hurt rises, and it leaks into my mental voice. *"You've watched me flounder for eight months, and you've said nothing. Now he's here and acting like—"* The hurt swells, climbing into my throat and strangling my bond with Bert.

He winces.

"Sorry," I say aloud, rubbing a finger between his ears. He hangs his head and gives a mournful-sounding squeak.

"I'm the sorry one," he says quietly in my mind. *"You're right. I haven't been a good friend."*

"That's not true," I murmur.

"Yes, it is." He curls his tail around his furry hindquarters. *"I suck."*

"No, you don't." I flick his whiskers. *"I mean, you definitely suck when you chew through electrical cords. And the wood trim in the foyer."*

"And the table legs."

"Right," I say in his head. *"I forgot about those."*

He waves a paw in front of his face. *"It's a dental thing."*

"Totally get it."

"No one's perfect," he says, a smile in his eyes.

The tension drains from our bond, and I smile back. "Not even a little bit," I say out loud. "But I

still love you."

"Gross. I love you, too."

We smile at each other for a long moment. Then he tips his head toward my bedroom. *"Did you push the wardrobe in front of the window?"*

"Yeah. I was trying to block the sun."

Bert's expression goes solemn. *"But it didn't work?"*

I sigh as I gaze over the city. "No," I say out loud. "It was too bright to be muffled."

He falls silent again. Then he looks toward the end of the terrace that borders the living room. *"So, what are you gonna do?"*

Another sigh lifts my chest. *"I don't know."* I give a humorless laugh and speak out loud. "I'm a prisoner in my own bedroom."

Bert's shoulders slump. Before either of us can say anything more, a pigeon swoops to the terrace and perches on the balcony.

"Hey, Lyle," I say. "How's it going?"

Lyle flutters his wings in the pigeon version of a shrug. *"Oh, you know, up and down."*

I look at Bert, who shakes his head. *"I'm not saying it."*

Lyle laughs, the sound emerging as a series of broken coos.

"Fine," I say on a sigh, "I'll say it." I give Lyle a pointed look, and he delivers the punchline with me: *"Like a bird."*

The carrier pigeon slaps one gray wing against his leg as he coos loudly.

Bert stares at Lyle like he'd love to push him off the balcony. *"Yeah, that one never gets old."*

"Lighten up, Bertram," Lyle says, his mental voice thick with an Old Brooklyn accent. He turns a sly look on me. *"Got a message for you, Jasper. Sloan is in town. He saw what went down at the Syndicate Ball and wants to meet for drinks."*

I snort. *"You mean he wants to meet for gossip."*

Lyle shrugs again. *"Is there a difference?"*

Good point. And Sloan is fun. Demons are always a good time. We dated a few years ago before we both realized we wanted different things. But we parted amicably.

Lyle coos, his orange eyes sweeping around the terrace. *"So you've got an elven prince locked in a magical contract, huh? Where is he?"*

"None of your business," Bert says, leaping from the table to the railing. He lands inches from Lyle's claws, forcing the pigeon to scramble backward.

"Hey!" Lyle flaps his wings and resettles. *"I'm standing here."*

"You mean squatting," Bert says.

Lyle draws himself up. *"It's called* alighting*, and it's very elegant."*

Bert takes a menacing step forward.

"All right, take it easy," I say, putting a hand between them. When Bert withdraws with a glower, I turn to Lyle. *"Where does Sloan want to meet?"*

"Al's Place in the East Village."

The last of the sun's rays disappear behind the towers of Old Manhattan. The temperature plunges, winter air swirling.

I meet Lyle's orange gaze. *"Tell him I'll see him there."*

Minutes later, I enter the living room with an armful of clothes. Vale rises from the sofa with a wary look. Sully jumps from the rolled arm and settles at Vale's feet. At first, I don't see Izig. Then I notice him in the hallway between the living room and the foyer, his bulky body as still as a statue.

I frown. “Have you been standing there all day?”

The ogre’s expression is as inscrutable as ever. “I’m guarding the door. The prince’s safety is paramount.”

I go to the armchair angled near the sofa and dump the clothes on it. “Well, you can take a break and help His Royal Highness put some clothes on.” I stride toward the foyer. “I’m going out,” I toss over my shoulder.

“Where are you going?” Vale demands, a curious catch in his voice.

When I stop and face him, his golden gaze is locked on my hip, where the edge of a red thong—which I did *not* wear to show him what he can’t have—peeks above my skinny jeans. I lift my brows. “I don’t see how that’s any of your concern.”

His jaw tightens. He drags his eyes up to mine, and for a moment it looks like he’ll challenge me. Then he gestures to the clothes. “These are too big for you.”

“No kidding.” I examine my nails. “They belonged to an ex. He left them behind after I threw him out.”

Vale’s voice goes soft. “You want me to wear your ex-boyfriend’s castoffs?”

Goosebumps lift on my skin. His tone is soft, but the edge within it is as sharp as steel. He could flatten me. Pin me down again and stretch that muscled body over mine. I wouldn’t hate it. Gods, even now—even knowing what an absolute asshole he is—I crave him.

And that won’t do. Whatever it takes, I’ve got to get him out of my head. Then I can get him out of my home—and my life—for good.

Forcing a smile, I wave a hand around the room. “I think we can all agree we’d like you to wear *something*.” I turn and move toward the foyer. Halfway down the hall, I pause and turn back. “Don’t leave.” I tap the bond, and Vale grunts. His eyes glitter.

“That’s an order,” I add, then I spin and walk away, his golden stare like a weight between my shoulder blades.

Two hours later, I grimace as Sloan launches into yet another story about a wild party he attended at Wotan’s club, Cauchemar.

“You would have loved it,” he says, leaning over the table. A plate of onion rings sits untouched between us. Sloan’s thick fingers curl around the base of his longneck bottle as he chatters on, his white fangs flashing in a handsome face I used to admire. The demon is undeniably hot. But every time my gaze lands on his dark curls, golden-brown waves take their place.

Around us, Al’s Place hums with conversation punctuated by occasional bursts of laughter. Behind the bar, Al slings drinks, his tentacles writhing from under a blue velvet jacket. Bert would definitely have something to say about it, but I left him at home to make sure Mert and Luke steer clear of Sully.

Under the table, Sloan nudges my foot with his. “Hey, babe. You listening?”

I move my foot away. “Sorry.” I pluck a string of seaweed from my Long Island Iced Tea and grimace as I set it aside. “I wish Al would find another garnish.” I plaster a smile on my face as I meet Sloan’s green gaze. “Krakens, am I right?”

Sloan’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes. He takes another pull of his beer before settling back in his chair. “You still haven’t told me what’s going on with this prince of yours.”

"He's not mine." I force a shrug even as aggravation tightens my shoulders. "And there's not much to say."

"Really? People couldn't stop talking about it at the Ball last night." Sloan shifts forward again, his dark horns catching the light. "You and the prince looked…cozy up there."

"Well, we weren't." My voice rises without my permission, the last word lifting over the noise of the bar. Several people turn toward me, curiosity on their faces.

Sloan raises both hands as he laughs softly. "Sorry, man. I didn't mean to pry." He grins, and his green eyes make a leisurely trip down my body. "I guess I'm just jealous. You and I had a lot of fun together."

My nape heats, aggravation turning to discomfort. Coming out tonight was a mistake. It's been obvious from the start that Sloan doesn't want to reminisce. He wants to hook up. And maybe I thought I wanted that, too.

But now, my skin crawls at the thought of spending the night in his bed. At having his thick-fingered hands on me.

Unbidden, my mind fills with images of strong, tanned hands stroking over my skin. Wrapping around my cock and pulling just so—just enough force to drag me right to the edge without letting me fall over it.

"I have to go," I blurt, standing so abruptly my chair rocks onto its back legs. I grab it before it can fall.

In a blink, Sloan stands before me, his broad chest brushing my arm. "You didn't even finish your drink."

I dig into my pocket, then toss a pair of bills onto the table. "I know. Just not feeling it tonight." I step back just as Sloan grabs my arm.

His fingers tighten on my bicep as his green eyes flash neon bright. "I don't believe that for a second," he says, his beer-scented breath wafting over my face. He pulls me against him, letting me feel his erection as his lips quirk in a suggestive smile. "You're never not feeling it, babe."

I tug at his grip and promptly get nowhere. "Let me go, Sloan."

"Come home with me."

"Not tonight."

He dips his chin, his lips aimed at my mouth. When I turn my head at the last second, he plants a sloppy kiss on the side of my neck. "Damn, Jasper, you're as hot as ever," he rasps in my ear. "I like this little game."

Tugging harder, I let my outrage flow down my arm to my hand. I curl my fingers, ready to hex the shit out of him. "It's not a game. Let me go or you'll be itching for a week."

He lifts his head. His suggestive smile fades as his expression hardens. "You met me tonight. And now you're running off?"

"That's exactly right," I say, looking him straight in the eye. "The answer is no."

He bares his teeth. "I don't think so, you little dick tease."

Anger explodes in my chest.

At the same moment, light explodes inside the bar. It sears my eyes, and I stumble back as Sloan releases me and throws his arms up.

"What the fuck?" he cries, banging into the table and setting beer bottles trembling. Gasps and shouts fill the bar. Chairs clatter to the floor.

The light dims—and then concentrates on Sloan, who hunches over as the fat yellow beam forces him backward. He cries out again as he stumbles to the wall and falls against it.

Slowly, the source of the light comes into view. My breath seizes in my lungs.

Vale.

He stands a dozen feet away, his body lit up like the sun. Light flows from the center of his chest, the beam streaming from under the black T-shirt that fit my ex-boyfriend just fine but strains across Vale's thick, round pecs. Muscles bunch as he stalks forward, grips Sloan by the shoulder, and slams him into the wall.

"I believe the gentleman told you no," Vale growls, sounding more inhuman than I've ever heard him. His glamour drops like a curtain, revealing the shimmering elven prince with eyes like molten sunlight.

Sloan quakes under Vale's grip. "I-I'm sorry."

Without taking his eyes off Sloan, Vale jerks his head toward me. "Don't apologize to me. Apologize to him."

"Sorry!" Sloan turns frightened eyes to me. "I'm sorry, Jasper. It won't happen again."

Vale shoves the demon more forcefully against the wall. Sloan grunts as an ominous *crunch* splits the air. Vale leans in and flashes his fangs. "If you ever speak to Jasper again, if you even *think* about glancing in his direction, I will find you. No matter how long it takes or how many oceans I have to cross, I will hunt you down and end you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Sloan says weakly. His lashes flutter as he draws a shaky breath. "I-I understand."

Vale steps back swiftly. Sloan darts around him and leaves the bar in a blur.

For a moment, no one moves. Vale rolls his head like a boxer stretching in the ring.

The sun winks out, and his glamour slams back into place.

"You!" Al lumbers around the bar and points a thick tentacle at Vale. Another tentacle pokes the air in my direction. "And you!"

Shock jolts me. I touch my chest. "Me?"

"Yeah, Lilygully," the kraken says, displeasure in his eyes. "Take your boyfriend and get out of here."

"He's not my boyfriend."

Al props his humanoid hands on his hips. "I don't give a fuck if he's your grandmother, he put a dent in my wall." The kraken jerks a thumb toward the door. "Both of you get out before I bounce you myself."

Laughter ripples through the bar. Suddenly, I realize everyone is staring, curious gazes moving from Vale to me. In one corner, a woman puts her lips to her companion's ear and whispers furiously.

Al starts toward me.

"I'm going!" Face flaming, I head for the door. Vale falls into step just behind me. I keep my head down and my wings folded close to my body as I shove the heavy door open.

Thunder greets me as I step onto the pavement. The scent of ozone hits my nose.

"Are you all right?" Vale asks at my back.

I whirl just as the door closes behind him, cutting off the noise from the bar.

"What the fuck?" I say on a near shout. "I told you to stay in the apartment."

Vale shakes his head. "You said *don't leave*. That could mean anything, including don't leave the Hallows."

"Well, I wish you would!"

Pain flits through his eyes. The electric bulb above the bar's painted sign flickers as it fights a losing battle with magic. Vale glances at it, and the light swells. In the distance, lightning forks across the sky. A second later, thunder booms.

Vale steps closer. “I don’t think you mean that,” he rumbles. “And anyway, you need me around.”

I suck in a breath—and get a lungful of his scent. It makes me want to moan, so I cover my reaction by raising my voice. “I can take care of myself, you arrogant prick!”

“Of course,” he growls, stepping so close we’re practically nose to nose. “Because you were doing such a fine job of it in there.”

“I was doing fine until you showed up!” I shove him. “I’m not an ancient, muscle-bound prince who beams sunshine out his ass, but I’ve managed to stay alive this long. And I’ve fucked about a thousand more guys than you, so back off.”

Something savage flashes in his eyes. “If I had my way, you’d never fuck anyone else again.”

Lightning flashes. The skies open, and rain falls in sheets.

I gasp as it soaks my hair and rolls down my neck. *Just like that first night in Paris.*

Vale stares at me, rain running down his face. His shoulders rise and fall as he pants like he just finished a sprint.

My heart pounds. I’m poised on the edge of a cliff. And I’m going to fall.

But I’m not sure I care. I step into him, bringing our faces a hair’s breadth apart as I let venom soak my voice. “You don’t need me, Your Highness. If you want to fuck so badly, you can run home and fuck your wife.”

Lightning flashes, illuminating the barely leashed anger in Vale’s eyes. “I don’t have a wife. I don’t want a wife.” He drags in a breath. “Damn you, I want…” He blinks raindrops from his lashes as he drifts off.

“What?” I whisper. And I *know* better. I shouldn’t ask what he wants. He’s made it clear he doesn’t want me. But I’m powerless where he’s concerned. From the beginning, he has disarmed me.

Vale looks at me like someone just tore his heart from his chest. “Jasper,” he rasps.

I swallow the tears that clog my throat. “Vale.”

In one movement, he grabs me and pushes me against the side of the bar.

And then his lips are on mine. He cups my face in his big hands and plunders my mouth, kissing me and kissing me like he’ll die if he doesn’t. He plunges his tongue deep. Strokes it along mine before biting at my lips, my tongue, the side of my neck. He returns his mouth to mine and whimpers—the sound so broken and desperate it shakes something apart inside me. Cracks the veneer I painted over my heart. He kisses me, tasting of rain and summer and Paris under a canopy of stars.

“I don’t want anyone else,” he says hoarsely. “I only want you.”

The veneer crumbles, leaving only my bruised and broken heart. I shove him away, and I sag against the side of the bar as rain soaks me to the skin.

Vale stands on the sidewalk, his mouth swollen from our kiss. He shivers as frigid rain plasters his shirt to his chest.

It’s not summer anymore. It’s winter. How could I forget?

I push away from the wall, tremors racking me. “You can’t say shit like that to me,” I croak.

“I’m sorry.” He opens his mouth. Shuts it. Passes a shaking hand over his face and looks so lost and bewildered I can almost believe the act.

Almost.

Gothel owes me a favor. He’s one of the oldest beings in the world. If it’s possible to break the contract from the Brawl, he’ll know how to do it.

“I’m going home,” I tell Vale. I yank on the bond, and anger leaps into his eyes.

Good.

“Stay ten steps behind me and don’t speak,” I say. As the anger in Vale’s gaze grows, I start

toward home. When he falls into step behind me, I stop and look over my shoulder. “Tomorrow, I’m taking you to someone who can rid us of this contract. And then I never want to see you again.”

CHAPTER 12

VALE

"Chilly out there today."

I look up from the corner of the elevator to see Gothel's right hand man, Raoul, staring at me. Izig is a solid presence at my side. Sully sits at my feet with his tail curled around my calf. Jasper stands in the opposite corner of the tiny space, his hard gaze on the silver doors as we speed toward the upper levels of Gothel's headquarters. The rapid ascent makes my migraine—which I haven't been able to shake—worse than ever.

Jasper hasn't looked at me once since we left his apartment. He hasn't spoken to me, either, unless filtering instructions through Izig counts. *"Please tell Prince Vale to walk faster. The sooner we get to the Sky Syndicate, the better."*

When Izig dutifully repeated the order, I cut him off. *"There's nothing wrong with my hearing, Jasper."*

I got no response.

Raoul clears his throat, yanking me back to the present.

"Uh, yes," I say, turning my gaze to the diminutive grotesque. "It's a cold one." But not as cold as a certain pixie who hates my guts.

A bell chimes, and the doors slide open. Raoul leads us from the elevator, the spade-shaped tip of his tail bobbing. My head throbs harder with every step, and I clench my jaw against the pain.

Moments later, we enter Gothel's office. The scent of cigars hits my nose as the big gargoyle rises from his desk. But he's not alone.

Another large male sits on the edge of the polished surface, a cigar between his fingers. Green eyes gleam in a handsome face. A green stud winks in the man's ear. More gemstones glitter on his fingers. A three-piece suit hugs his powerful body. But it's the green flames flickering among his dark, wavy hair that let me know exactly who he is.

This can only be Fuoco of House Drakoni, Lord of the Fire Syndicate. We've never met, but his reputation precedes him. So do whispers of immense power.

"Thank you, Raoul," Gothel says, rounding his desk. As the grotesque disappears in a cloud of smoke, the gargoyle looks between me and Jasper with a troubled expression. "The whole Hallows is buzzing with news of what happened at the Syndicate Ball." He looks at Jasper and lowers his voice. "King Nylian of the Summer Court is a formidable power, Jasper. He won't like hearing you've locked his heir in a magical contract."

Jasper lifts his chin. "That's why I'm here. I want to annul it."

Gothel frowns. "You mean rescind it."

"Whatever."

Fuoco stares at Jasper intently. Smoke curls from the cigar poised between his fingers, but he pays it no mind. His green eyes narrow as Jasper continues speaking, his voice growing thick with emotion.

"I was h-hasty when I claimed Vale as my boon."

Gothel glances at me with a startled look. "You know Prince Vale?"

Jasper opens his mouth. "I—" He seems to wrestle with himself as if he's searching for the right words. After a second, he makes a frustrated sound. "It doesn't matter. I don't *want* to know him."

Bert pokes his head from Jasper's breast pocket. Sniffing, Jasper strokes the mouse's whiskers.

Fuoco shifts his gaze to me. His nostrils flare. The flames in his hair dance higher.

My nape tingles. I look away, but the dragon lord's stare is a palpable weight. Beside me, Izig shuffles his feet.

"The dragon is staring at you," Sully says in my head.

"I know."

Jasper and Gothel continue their conversation. Their voices fade into the background as I endure the dragon's scrutiny. Jasper's tone is increasingly agitated. Gothel's voice stays at a low, gravelly rumble. But I can't follow the discussion with my heart pounding and knives stabbing into my skull. Nausea roils my gut. Despite the office's pleasant temperature, a cold sweat breaks out over my skin. I swipe at my clammy forehead.

"So, can you break the contract?" Jasper demands, his voice tight to the point of snapping.

"I don't know," Gothel says.

Jasper's wings beat the air, sending cigar smoke wafting around me. "That's not good enough! I need—"

"Wait," a deep voice says.

Jasper clamps his mouth shut. Bert ducks back into his pocket.

Fuoco eases off Gothel's desk. Power crackles around the room as he crosses to Jasper. The dragon lord's brilliant green eyes narrow as he tips Jasper's chin up with a glittering nail. Fuoco's expression goes soft, almost affectionate. "What happened in Paris, my friend? When I left you there, you were full of life. The male who returned home is not the same."

Jasper's lower lip trembles, and he looks away. Fuoco drops his hand and waits.

A tear slides down Jasper's cheek. "I— In Paris, we spent— We—" He makes a flustered sound as he pinches the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry. It's difficult to talk about this."

Fuoco's gaze sharpens. "Difficult or impossible?"

Jasper lowers his hand. He opens his mouth. Shuts it. Bert reemerges, and he and Jasper stare at each other. "Yeah," Jasper says slowly, "we've both had a hard time discussing it. Ever since"—he inhales sharply as he looks at Fuoco—"I got back."

The room stills. A strange awareness fills the air as everyone stares at Jasper…then me.

Fuoco studies Jasper for a long moment. "Let's try this. When I ask you a question, don't try to answer. Just nod for *yes* and shake your head for *no*."

"Okay."

The dragon lord smiles. "No speech. Just gestures. You spent time in Paris this past spring?"

Jasper nods.

"Mmm," Fuoco says. "Did you meet someone new there?"

Jasper closes his eyes on a long blink. He nods.

"And you spent time with this person?"

Nod.

"You liked this person?"

Nod.

"And he liked you?"

A pained, breathless sound escapes Jasper's lips. He nods.

Fuoco's voice softens. "Was this person Prince Vale?"

Jasper nods.

The dragon lord looks at me, his green eyes gleaming more brightly than anything in the room. I fight the urge to squirm under his penetrating stare, which pins me like a butterfly on a mat.

Finally, he turns back to Jasper. "Something bad happened in Paris?"

Jasper nods, misery in his eyes.

"Prince Vale did something bad?"

Another nod.

My heart thumps faster. The pain in my head flares with every beat.

Fuoco touches Jasper's jaw, and his voice goes gentle. "You fell in love with Vale in Paris. And he fell in love with you."

Jasper nods once. Pale pink dust sifts slowly from his wings, which droop toward the floor.

"But something happened to that love," Fuoco says quietly.

Jasper nods.

"Because Prince Vale won't speak to you now?"

Jasper hesitates. Then he shakes his head.

"Because you don't want to be with him."

My heart skips a beat. I lean forward, poised on the edge of a cliff as I wait for Jasper's answer.

He shakes his head. *Wrong.* He *does* want to be with me.

Fuoco leans forward and sniffs at the air around Jasper.

Jasper stiffens. "What are you doing?" he asks hoarsely.

"Scenting you."

"Why?"

Fuoco gives him a patient look. "You know all about my power, Jasper. Allow me to use it."

Jasper's gaze lands briefly on mine. A frown appears between his eyes before he turns to Fuoco. "Go ahead."

The dragon lord walks a circle around him, staring him up and down before leaning in to sniff at his neck. I shove down a possessive snarl when his nose brushes the skin under Jasper's ear.

Several excruciatingly silent minutes later, Fuoco straightens. "Prince Vale doesn't remember you. And when you try to speak of it, you find that you can't."

Jasper's lips part. He nods.

Fuoco returns the nod, then lifts his voice as he addresses the room. "This is dark magic. A geas—and an incredibly powerful one."

Gothel sucks in a sharp breath, his whiskey-colored eyes going hard. "Who could have placed it? And why?"

Fuoco turns curious eyes to me. "I think the answer to that probably lies in Prince Vale." He advances toward me, his gaze taking in Izig and Sully standing like sentinels on either side of me. The dragon lord inclines his head. "May I examine you, Your Highness?"

"Of course," I say, my voice as hoarse as Jasper's. I can't help looking at him. He stands where Fuoco left him, a frown pulling his pale brows together.

Fuoco rests a big hand on my shoulder. "This might hurt a little."

"I can handle it." Nothing can hurt worse than the way Jasper has looked at me these past two days. Nothing could possibly drive a stake deeper through my heart.

The air around me heats, lifting the hair on my nape. I hold still as the other males watch. The heat intensifies, invisible flames crackling around me. My chest tightens until every breath is an effort. A wall of phantom fire blasts my face, ruffling my hair and searing my eyes like I'm standing before a roaring fireplace.

But there's no fire. Just Fuoco and his intense green eyes that seem to see straight through me.

I widen my stance as daggers of pain slice through my skull. At the edge of my vision, Gothel observes with a steady gaze. My father's old friend trusts Lord Fuoco. Right now, I can only hope his judgment is sound.

Sully whines across our bond as he leans hard against my leg.

Heat blasts me. Flames lick at my insides, filling my lungs with scorching air. My chest heaves as I try to draw oxygen into greedy, empty lungs.

Fuoco's brilliant green eyes fill my vision. The air grows hotter.

Unbearable. I was wrong. I can't withstand this.

The daggers stab more deeply, driving into my brain over and over. Someone cries out.

Me. I've lost control. Father will be so disappointed.

Your father will never know, Abelin.

The fire inside me soars.

Icicles on the ceiling.

Blood on marble.

Ybris slithering across the floor.

Jasper.

Pixies have long memories, Your Highness. We never forget a slight.

Stars reflected in the Seine.

Bright blue eyes smiling into mine.

The daggers in my brain twist sharply.

"I can't," I gasp, my voice coming from far away. "I can't bear it!"

Everything stops.

The fire disappears.

I stumble into Fuoco, who grips my shoulders and steadies me.

"Jasper," I say, lifting my head and searching for him.

"I'm here," he answers, and a hand slips into mine. When I straighten, he's beside me. We stare at each other, something tremulous and raw passing between us.

Fuoco steps back, his expression grim. "It's worse than I thought. The geas is the strongest I've ever encountered. It's a wonder you're not passed out on the floor simply by being in the same room with Jasper."

"Do you feel sick?" Gothel asks, moving forward.

"Yes," I rasp. "From the moment I saw Jasper at the Brawl. I feel dizzy, and my stomach churns. I've had a migraine since yesterday."

"Me too," Izig says gruffly. "And I've struggled with nausea."

Sully yowls.

I look down at him. *"You've felt sick, too? Why didn't you tell me?"*

My familiar rubs his whiskers over my calf. *"You had enough on your plate."* He gives my leg another smooth stroke. *"Although, it would have been fun to see the pixie's reaction if I puked up a*

hairball on his rug."

I look at Fuoco. "We've all felt sick."

Fuoco's expression is thoughtful as he looks over Izig and Sully. "If members of your household were present when the geas was placed, it could hold sway over them, as well."

Cold fury replaces the sick feeling in my stomach. Tendrils of anger spread through my body. Someone tampered with my head. Izig and Sully like to say they protect me. But I protect them, too. And someone hurt them on my watch.

Jasper's quiet voice is like cool water on the rage sparking inside me. "I don't understand. If someone put this geas on Vale, why do *I* struggle to speak of him?"

"A geas can be transferred by touch or through an object," Gothel says. "A note, a book, something like that. Have you received anything like that recently?"

Jasper scrunches his brow. Then he gasps, his eyes going wide. "Your note, Vale. You left me a note in Paris when—" He stops. Shakes his head when the words won't come.

I squeeze his hand. "Don't worry about it."

Bert pops up from his pocket, and Jasper's eyes go wide again.

"Bert!" he gasps, looking from the mouse to Fuoco. "Bert chased after the note. He— Touched…"

"Bert touched the note, too," Fuoco guesses. "And he struggles to speak of Vale."

Jasper bobs his head up and down, his wings bobbing with him.

"Is there a way to lift this geas?" I ask Fuoco.

The dragon lord's expression grows sorrowful. "Only the being who placed it can remove it."

"Wait," Gothel says, meeting Fuoco's gaze. "There might be another way."

Understanding lights Fuoco's eyes. "Tower."

Gothel nods. "Give me a minute." He goes to the door and speaks to someone in the hall. Moments later, Tower du Sang enters the office. The vampire listens patiently as Gothel murmurs in his ear, no doubt giving him a quick summary of the last twenty minutes. When Gothel lifts his head, a look of determination fills Tower's eyes.

"I'll try."

Gothel caresses the vampire's smooth cheek. "Thank you, sweetheart."

Tower turns to Jasper. "Let's start with you first. If you simply touched an item tainted by a geas, that might be easier to remove."

"No," I say. "Start with me. I don't want to risk him being hurt. Try it on me."

Jasper makes a sound of protest as he swings toward me. "Vale. You don't have to do that."

I bring my thumb to his plump lower lip and stroke. "We'll figure this out, but I'd rather he try it on me first."

Blue eyes glimmer with moisture. Jasper threads his fingers through mine. "I'll be right here, okay?"

Tower holds out his hand. "Give me your wrist. I don't know if it'll work, but it's worth a try."

I let him take my arm. "Have you ever siphoned a geas?"

Arrogance flashes in his eyes. "No, but if anyone can do it, it's me." He bares his fangs and strikes hard, nailing the inside of my wrist. Blood spills from the wound as a warm, heavy sensation pools deep in my gut. I grunt as he drinks in great pulls that send pleasure tingling through me.

But after a second, the pleasure turns to discomfort. Then the discomfort becomes a fire under my skin.

I stiffen, memories of Fuoco's power threatening to drag a whimper from my throat.

Jasper squeezes my hand. It's an effort to turn my head toward him, but I do it. "Eyes on me," he

whispers. “I’ve got you.”

I return his squeeze, and I hold his stare as Tower continues to feed. An uncomfortable niggling sensation begins to worm its way through my mind. Doors lock and unlock somewhere inside me, fluttering open and shut. Pain explodes behind my eyes. My knees loosen, but Jasper holds me up. Keeps me steady. He grips my hand as the fire in my veins spirals into agony that steals my breath and makes my eyes water. Just when I can’t stand it any longer, Tower releases his bite and staggers back.

Gothel catches him, his claw-tipped fingers curling protectively around the vampire’s shoulders. The gargoyle dips his head and plants a soft kiss on Tower’s neck. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Tower says, wiping blood from his lips. He gives me an apologetic look. “I’m sorry I couldn’t remove all of it, but I think I blunted its side effects. You might be able to talk about Jasper without feeling ill. It’s possible you’ll regain a few memories, too.”

Even before he finishes his sentence, I know he speaks the truth. My migraine is gone. As the pain of Tower’s bite fades, glimpses of memories filter through my head.

Jasper on his hands and knees in front of my fireplace.

Jasper eating chocolate-filled croissants with Bert.

Sully rubbing his cheek along Jasper’s when he thinks I’m not looking.

Love.

The memories shimmer with love. Blank spaces still dot them, but they’re there.

They’re mine.

Jasper is mine.

And someone took him from me.

“I know who did this,” I say, certainty swelling as I look around the room. “My father’s wife. I’m betrothed to her daughter, Princess Liriel. The wedding is in less than two weeks.” I turn to Jasper. “Zaphira must have found out about us.”

Hurt descends over Jasper’s features. “You—” He clamps his lips together and makes a frustrated sound.

“Allow me,” Tower says, stepping forward. Jasper’s eyes flutter shut as the vampire strikes, and he groans as the feeding wears on. But he endures without complaint, and when Tower finally steps back, Jasper opens his eyes and speaks clearly for the first time since the Syndicate Ball.

“You could have told me about the betrothal, Vale.”

The regret that clamps tightly around my heart is worse than anything I’ve endured since I entered the office. “I kept that from you?” I ask, but I already know the answer. Flashes of memory burst against the blank spaces in my mind.

Jasper tipping his head back to bask in the sun.

Barrels of bouquets wrapped in brightly colored paper.

Sully’s voice in my head, warning of folly. Of duty.

Plans to speak to my father.

“I was never going to marry her,” I tell Jasper now. “But you’re right. I should have told you.” I close my eyes and fight through the shadows, desperate to grab more glimpses of the past. “I wanted to tell you, and I would have,” I say, opening my eyes. “I ask your forgiveness now, even though I don’t deserve it.”

Tears swim in his eyes. “We can talk about it later,” he says thickly.

It’s not a definitive answer. But it’s a start.

Over the next few minutes, Tower removes as much of the geas as he can from Izig, Sully, and Bert. When he straightens from biting Sully, I stroke my familiar’s whiskers away from his face.

"I need to ask a favor, Sulien."

He purrs into our bond. *"Anything."*

"Return to the Summer Court. Take Bert and Mert with you."

Sully startles. *"Mice?"*

"They can reach places you can't. People ignore things they don't want to see, and most people don't want to see mice. Use that to your advantage. Work together. Find out how Zaphira did this." I hesitate. *"And find out if my father had a hand in it."*

Surprise flares in Sully's eyes. Then my familiar dips his head. *"Consider it done."*

Gothel's office door swings open and a dark-haired man carries a platter of cookies inside. Fuoco springs forward, meeting the man halfway and taking the platter from him.

"Sorry to intrude," the man says, a dimple appearing in his cheek as he offers a shy smile. "I, uh, brought cookies."

"I see that, selsara," Fuoco murmurs, guiding the man to Gothel's desk. The dragon lord sets the platter down, then pulls the man into his arms and buries his face in the man's neck.

The human's cheeks go scarlet. "We have an audience."

Fuoco lifts his head and winks at his mate. "When has that ever stopped me?"

"Fair point."

Smiling, Fuoco turns to me. "Prince Vale, this is my selsara, Beau Bidbury. Beau, this is Prince Vale of the Summer Court."

"Pleased to meet you," I say, bowing.

Beau's smile transforms his face from handsome to dazzling. "The pleasure is mine, Your Highness." He gestures to the desk. "I don't have magic, but I brought sugar."

Fuoco wraps an arm around the smaller man's shoulders. "Sugar is its own kind of magic, my love."

My love. I'll do anything to regain what I've lost. What's been taken from me. When I turn to Jasper, I find him watching Fuoco and Beau. But as he feels my gaze on him, he turns his blue eyes to mine.

I hold out my hand. "Come home with me?" Memories whirl and spin through my head. I've said those words before. I have to hope his answer is the same as it was the first time.

He stares at my palm. Then he meets my gaze. "Okay."

My heart soars as I grab his hand. "Let's go home."

Because I'm keeping you. I don't say it aloud, but maybe he hears it anyway. Zaphira might have stolen him from me once, but I won't lose him a second time. She's always been one step ahead of me on our personal chessboard.

Not this time.

And never again.

CHAPTER 13

JASPER

Vale casts me anxious looks the whole way back to my apartment. He's right to be anxious. With every step, my temper flares. The sky matches my mood, dark clouds clustering around Gothel's skyscrapers and threatening another frigid winter storm.

Izig obviously senses the coming reckoning, because he murmurs something about buying lunch and peels off like a man with self-preservation on his mind. Sully slinks after him, his sleek form disappearing into the shadows.

Seconds later, Bert speaks in my head. *"I'll, uh, give you and Vale some time alone to chat."*

"Abandoning ship?" I say through our bond as I lower him to the ground.

"Never." He flicks his tail against my leg. *"But you and your man are gonna have it out, and I value my eardrums. Plus, Sully said he wanted to talk to me about something."*

"Hopefully not his favorite mouse-based cuisine."

As Bert runs off, Vale's apprehension becomes a palpable weight between us. "Jasper…" he begins.

"Not here," I say without looking at him. "You have no idea how nosy this neighborhood is." *Also, I will probably end up yelling at you in the street.*

I can't blame Vale for his memory loss anymore. His bitch of a stepmother has a lot to answer for.

But so does he.

As we enter the living room, I toss my keys on the coffee table and face him. "Well?"

He rubs his hand over his mouth, his golden eyes stark above his palm. "I…don't know what to say."

I direct a humorless laugh toward the ceiling. "Irony isn't dead, after all."

Vale frowns. "You're mocking me."

"Really?" I step toward him. "Your headache is gone. You finally have enough memories to know I'm not a total stranger, and you can't think of a single thing to say right now? How about, *'I'm sorry, Jasper, that I fucking lied to you about marrying my stepsister.'* Maybe start with that one."

"I'm sorry—"

"There you go," I say, sarcasm dripping from my voice. "Was that so hard?"

"Jasper—"

"And if you even dare to claim you didn't lie, I'm going to tell you right now that you're full of shit. A lie of omission is just as damaging—and intentional—as outright falsehood."

"I know—"

"You fucked me," I growl, stepping closer and stabbing a finger at him. "You were inside me,

Vale, and the whole time you knew you were betrothed. Every walk in Paris. Every meal we shared." Tears burn my throat. "This betrothal should have been the first thing out of your mouth when we met. But you didn't want it that way, did you? No, you wanted to have one last gay fling before your big day."

"That is *not* true," he says, his eyes flashing. "You were never a fling for me."

"Says the man so deep in the closet I could throw a party in it."

"You're wrong." He thumps his chest. "I'm gay, Jasper. I've never denied it. Everyone knows it. You were never a secret."

"Then why—"

"Gods, will you let me finish?" When I shut my mouth and fold my arms, he releases a shaky breath. "I don't have any excuses. I had my reasons for not telling you about Liriel, and they were all the *wrong* reasons. They were wrong, baby."

I lift a hand as I close my eyes. "Don't," I say carefully, tears brimming under my lids. "Do not with that right now."

"Okay."

The air shifts, and I know he's moved closer. He knows better than to touch me, but his body heat caresses my skin, dispelling the last of the chill that clings to me after the long walk home.

"Everything changed when I met you," he says quietly. With my eyes closed, my senses are limited to his voice and his scent. I can't block them out, so I stand still as summer invades my lungs and his deep rumble fills my ears.

"*Everything* changed," he says again. "You're not going to believe me, but I knew it from the second I bumped into you in Mab's court. I didn't fall down, but I might as well have. That's what it felt like, anyway."

I open my eyes and find him inches away, his eyes bright with unshed tears.

He nods, his throat bobbing. "I remember it. I, uh"—he swipes a knuckle under his eyes—"I don't remember everything, but I remember that." He lowers his hand as his voice goes gruff. "I knew at that precise second that I would rather die than marry Liriel. And that's what I was facing—what I'm still facing. I took an elven vow to wed her."

"What?" I gasp, my heart speeding up.

He slashes a hand through the air. "It doesn't matter. Because I'm more determined than ever to get out of it. I won't marry her, Jasper. I can't. Not when you're in this world." Tears spill from his eyes, the tracks like trails of sunlight sparkling on water. "Life is worthless without you in it. Do you understand what I'm saying? If you kick me out right now, I'll go. I won't trouble you anymore. I'll do whatever you tell me to do. But I will go the rest of my miserable life holding you in my heart. If that's the only place I can hold you, that's what I'll do. Because there is *no one else* for me. No one. Even the glimpses of you I see in my memories are enough to convince me that you're meant to be mine. And standing before you now, I'm absolutely certain." He drags in a ragged breath. "I chose you once. I would choose you a thousand times. I'd choose you *every* time."

I put a trembling hand over my mouth. He goes blurry as the tears I've been fighting streak down my face.

"God, don't cry," he rasps, lifting tentative hands. When I don't stop him, he cups my face and rubs the tears away with his thumbs. "I love you. I'm an asshole."

A watery laugh bursts from behind my palm. I lower it and swallow against my burning throat. "If you ever hurt me like that again—"

"Never," he says fiercely. "I swear it on the sun."

I close my eyes again. This time, his light glows through my lids. When I open my eyes, his glamour is gone, all his glory revealed.

"I want to make love to you," he murmurs. "You're going to tell me to go fuck myself. You should. But I'll sit on this sofa and hope that one day you'll let me touch you again." He rests his forehead against mine. "That's what's going to sustain me, Jasper. The hope that, one day, I'll be a good enough man to deserve you again."

"Gods," I breathe.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers. "I can't tell you enough how much I—"

"Vale?"

He tenses. "Yes?"

"Shut up and take me to bed."

Slowly, he pulls back. Stares at me for one breathless moment. Then he grabs me around the thighs and lifts me, hiking me roughly into his arms. He seizes my mouth in a savage kiss as he strides toward my room. I throw my legs around his waist and grab his hair in both fists, climbing him like a tree. He bumps into the doorframe and grunts as he shoulders into the bedroom. Lust rides me hard, bowing my spine and putting a growl in my voice as I grind my cock into his stomach.

"Fucking need you," I say between kisses.

"You're getting me." He flings me onto the bed.

My back hits the mattress with enough force to knock the wind out of me and set the room spinning. It's still whirling when Vale rips my clothes off, feral sounds spilling from his mouth. He strips like a man possessed, then lands on top of me and slants his mouth across mine. His kiss is rough and insistent as he runs a hand down my body to cup my dick.

"Yes," I gasp, thrusting into his hand. He grips me hard and circles my tip with his thumb.

"So wet," he growls, rubbing precum around my cockhead. "Spread your legs."

The command yanks a whimper from me as I obey. I whimper again when he slides his wicked fingers under my sack and strokes firm circles around my hole.

Moaning into his mouth, I dig my hands into his hair and drag his head down my my neck. He goes willingly, biting along my jugular to my chest, where he swirls his tongue over the bar through one of my nipples. I hold my breath, then release it on a wanton cry as his teeth close over my nipple. As he suckles me, he continues tracing his finger round and round my rim, each circuit sending thick waves of heat rolling through me.

Lightning flashes outside, followed by a boom of thunder so loud it rattles the glass in the terrace doors.

Vale continues to tease my hole until a steady stream of whimpers fall from my lips.

"Hurry," I whisper, clutching his head to my chest. I buck against his finger, trying to coax it inside me.

"Not yet." Abandoning my nipple, he seizes my wrists and pins them beside my head. His eyes smolder as he looks me over, his gaze lingering on the juncture of my thighs. "Wider," he murmurs. "Show me where you want me."

Breathing heavily, I spread my legs until my tendons ache. "Please."

When he meets my stare again, he licks his lips. "I need to taste you."

My breath whooshes out of me. Cool air caresses my damp nipple. The thought of having his mouth on other parts of me makes me squirm. "I need you to."

"I know." He releases my wrists. "Arms above your head."

My heart pounds faster as I do what he says. Rain lashes the terrace doors, sending shadowy

rivulets over the bed and our naked bodies.

"Stay like that," Vale says, trailing his fingertips down the valley between my pecs. He keeps going, traveling down my stomach and running his fingers through my pubes. As my stomach muscles tremble, he grips my cock and gives it a firm pump.

"Fuck," I groan, thrusting into his grip. Precum beads at my slit. "Faster."

Vale shakes his head. He works my shaft, his gaze locked with mine. "Not too much. Not just yet."

"Why?" I whine, thrusting harder. "I need to come."

He lets my dick slap against my stomach. "I told you." He grasps my ankles and holds my legs apart in a wide V. "I'm going to taste this pretty hole. And if it's as good as I remember, I'm going to eat your ass until you're out of your mind. And when you're begging, I am going to fuck you so hard and so good, baby." He gives my opening a light swat, making me jump and moan loudly. "I'm going to give you everything you want. And then I'll let you come." With that, he rolls me onto my shoulders, pushes my cheeks apart, and buries his face in my cleft.

At the first lash of his tongue, I shout loudly enough to rival the thunder. "Oh, gods!" I thrash my head back and forth as he laps at my rim. Folded in half, I dig my knees into the bed. My cock leaks onto my heaving stomach as Vale presses my cheeks wider and thrusts his tongue deep, fucking me with it.

"Seven hells," I groan, gripping the backs of my knees.

Vale lifts his head and meets my gaze between my spread legs. "You broke position."

"Can't help it," I say, my breaths ragged. "You're too fucking good at that."

His lips curve. "Look at you. So hot." He holds my gaze prisoner as he lowers his head enough to flick his tongue over my opening. "So pink and pretty for me." His eyes go heavy-lidded. "And I was wrong."

"About what?" I ask breathlessly, half out of my mind with need.

"You don't taste as good as I remember." He laps at my hole, and his eyes close briefly as a look of ecstasy spreads over his features. "You are, without question, the most delicious thing I've ever tasted, baby."

"I…" I shudder as he rubs his thumbs over my rim, holding me open. "I want you."

"I'm right here." Thumbs spreading me, he closes his mouth over my entrance and thrusts his tongue deep, nailing my gland.

Bliss. Raw and undiluted, it crackles through my veins as my mouth stretches on a soundless scream. I thrust my hips, shamelessly riding his face. Fucking myself against his mouth as he fucks me with his tongue. We meet somewhere in the middle, filling the bedroom with the heavy, slick noises of his intimate French kiss. He hums, sending vibrations into my opening as his stubble scrapes my sensitive cleft. Just when I think it can't get any better, he seals his mouth around my entrance and sucks, hollowing his cheeks with the effort.

"Fuck," I say, shuddering as my bones liquefy. "I'm going to—"

"No, you're not," he says, pulling back and then flattening his body atop mine. "Not without me." He kisses me, giving me my own wicked, forbidden taste as he rocks his hips so our erections slide against each other. He reaches down and lodges his dick against my opening, his cockhead prodding my damp entrance.

"Tell me," he rasps as he thrusts harder. "Tell me you want it. Tell me you want me."

"I want you." I gasp as he moves faster. "I want your cock."

"Lube?"

"Nightstand."

He fetches it and returns before the heat of his body leaves me.

Then he cranks everything up by a thousand.

He's everywhere, kissing me and stroking me. Kneeling between my legs and nuzzling my cockhead. Sucking my balls while he pumps a slick finger inside me, grazing my prostate over and over. He slides his hands up my thighs as he sucks my fingers into his mouth. Dips his tongue into my navel. Presses feverish kisses to my collarbone. I never know where he'll go next, and I'm too far gone to care. My mind blanks and sensation takes over, each brush of his skin against mine stoking the flames higher. Maybe they'll burn me up. Roar and climb and consume me.

"I want it," I tell him and everyone and no one at all. "I'm burning up and I want it." *I've always loved the sun.*

"Take it, then," he whispers, and he lines himself up and pushes inside me.

Lightning shears the sky outside. Thunder follows.

Vale braces himself above me, a lock of golden-brown hair hanging over his forehead as he works his cock deeper and deeper and then bottoms out. His balls press against my ass. His shaft throbs inside me. My dick lies trapped between us, the tip leaking all over my stomach.

Then Vale begins to move.

It's all heat and friction. Exquisite fullness. He pumps inside me, hitting my sweet spot and filling my vision with bursting stars. I wrap my legs around his waist and dig my heels into his back. Something this good can't last forever. It has to burn up on the way to the finish line. But I don't give a fuck. It feels too damn good to fight it.

So I don't. I let Vale take me to that place.

The place where pleasure overwhelms me.

The place where he's everything.

The place where it feels like this moment might last forever. A point in time I pinch between my fingers and stretch to infinity without the thread snapping.

Fires rage inside me. My whole body clenches as the flames become too strong to bear. I'm going to burn up, and I don't care. I've come this far. Or maybe I'm too lost to save anymore.

I'm lost.

I'm lost.

I'm lost.

But my elven prince found me. We can be lost together.

Vale's teeth graze my earlobe. His deep command rumbles in my ear as he works a hand between our bodies and pumps my dick. "Come for me, baby."

That's all it takes. My vision whites out as ecstasy floods my veins. I scream as I come, my release spreading over my stomach. The waves crash over me, each one higher and more powerful than the last.

Vale drives harder and faster inside me. He digs his fingers into my hips as he thrusts hard enough to shake the bed. Then he comes on a roar, spurting deep inside me. His big shoulders shake, and I reach up and drag him down. Pull him against me and hold him as he finishes with his face turned into my neck and his lips murmuring senseless things against my skin. And then his words are no longer senseless. They flutter against my ear, stirring my hair. Wrap around me and hold me as tightly as his arms. Pound as ceaselessly as his big heart beating against mine.

"I love you," he rasps. "I love you, I love you."

Rain spatters the glass doors and the terrace and all the rooftops of the Hallows. But the chilly drops can't reach us. Here, in the quiet room in the rumpled bed, there is only me and him.

"I love you, too," I whisper, and I close my eyes and hold the prince who found his way back to me.

HOURS LATER, I REST MY HEAD ON VALE'S SHOULDER AND STROKE MY FINGERS THROUGH THE LIGHT mat of hair that covers his chest. Dusk descended an hour ago, but we haven't left the bed. Outside, the rain has turned to snow. Fat flakes drift past the window.

"Do you think Izig is okay?" I ask, tracing the edges of Vale's tattoo.

He smiles as he captures my hand and brings it to his mouth. "He's an ogre." Vale kisses the tips of my fingers one by one. "Izig may look dapper, but he was brought up in a warrior culture. A little snow won't bother him."

I pull our joined hands away and study his knuckles for a moment before meeting his gaze. "Were you ever going to tell me about the brawling?"

Pink dusts Vale's cheekbones. "Of course." He turns his head on the pillow and gives me a tentative look. "But maybe you don't approve of it?"

"Did you worry I wouldn't?"

"Izig and Sully don't." He sighs as he plays with my fingers. "When I was young, brawling was a way to release aggression—and I had plenty of it. I was trapped in this rigid role. Then my mother died, and all those expectations became…too much."

I squeeze Vale's fingers gently, stilling his agitated movements. "I don't disapprove. You can punch as many people as you want. If you ever punch me, though, I'll hex your jock strap. Your dick will never know another moment of peace."

Humor gleams in his eyes. Then he sobers. "Brawling was always the one thing I had that was solely my own. A secret that maybe hid my other secret."

"I thought you said being gay wasn't a secret."

His chest lifts in another sigh. "It's not, really. I've dated men openly in the past, although I never took them to my father's court."

I raise my eyebrows. "He wouldn't allow it?"

"It's more…nuanced than that."

I sit up and flick my wings out of the way. "How is it nuanced? Your father either accepts that you're gay or he doesn't."

"You can't possibly see it as that black and white," Vale says, his voice tinged with exasperation. "Not everyone can be as freewheeling as pixies."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your species is literally known for throwing orgies. No one cares who you fuck."

"Right, because it's no one's business. Who gives a shit?"

"Not everyone thinks that way, Jasper."

"Well, they should."

Irritation moves through his eyes as he rises onto an elbow. "You don't understand. Elves are…" As my brows climb higher, he seems to grope for an explanation. "There is nothing relaxed or easy about the elven courts. The rules are rigid. Marriages are arranged for political gain, not love. My father adored my mother, but he didn't hesitate to wed Zaphira after Mother died. He sees no conflict between his personal desires, which he's content to keep private, and his public life. And his

marriage to Zaphira is part of his public life."

Warning bells clang in my head. "What are you saying?"

"My father has spies everywhere. I don't doubt for a second that he's been aware of my love life from the start. But he doesn't speak of things that interfere with duty. I'm his heir. In his mind, there's no question I'll marry for political power and produce heirs to further our line. As long as I'm discreet, he won't bat an eye if I take lovers on the side."

My mouth goes dry. "I can't live like that, Vale."

"I know," he says quickly, sitting up and taking my hand. "I can't, either. That's the difference between my father and me." He flashes a wry smile. "One of several differences, but that's the biggest one." Vale rubs his thumb over my knuckles. "I would never ask that of you, baby. It's not an option. I don't love Liriel, and I refuse to live a lie."

My heart climbs into my throat. "But you took an elven vow. Those are unbreakable. If you don't walk down that aisle, you'll die."

"If I can't be with you, I'll die anyway."

It's my turn to be exasperated. "Those are pretty words, Your Highness, but this is real-life shit. I will *not* bury you." A tear sprints down my cheek, and I suck in a painful breath as my voice rises. "I look amazing in black, and I refuse to retire it as a color because you were a stupid fucking idiot and chose to die rather than live for us!"

Between one breath and the next, I'm in Vale's arms. He surrounds me, his broad chest pressed to mine and his hands moving through my hair. His lips graze my cheek before he speaks in my ear.

"I'm not going to die. I sent Sulien, Bert, and Mert to the Summer Court to figure out what's going on with Zaphira. Once I'm certain my father wasn't involved in the geas, I'm going to approach him. He's one of the oldest—maybe *the* oldest—beings among the Myth. All magic can be undone, baby. I'm confident there's a way to break this vow."

I squeeze my eyes shut as I breathe him in. "But it's unbreakable for a reason."

"It can be broken," he insists. "My father will know of a way."

"Because he's one of the oldest beings among the Myth, so he knows everything." Maybe if I say it enough, it'll be true.

Vale strokes my hair. "And he loves me. Even ancient, powerful creatures will bend the rules for the people they love."

I freeze in his arms.

"What is it?" He pulls back, instant worry in his eyes. "Jasper?"

"Your father loves you."

"Yeah," Vale says, confusion joining the worry.

"And he's old. He knows things."

"That's right. But—"

"He's not the only ancient power in the world," I say. "And he's not the only one who cares about his family." I untangle myself from Vale's embrace and jump from the bed.

"Jasper?" he calls, scrambling after me as I hurry to the living room. Nude, he watches with a baffled expression as I crouch before the hearth and build a fire. "Baby," he says carefully, "is everything okay?"

"It's gonna be," I mumble, going to a small desk in the corner and pulling a sheet of stationery from the drawer. I scribble a note, sign it, and fold it in half. Then I go to the fire and fling it into the flames. Vale gasps as they flare high and shoot red sparks. The flames change color in rapid succession, going from orange to yellow to green.

I hold my breath as the green darkens to emerald. When it stays the rich shade, I release my breath and smile. “There. She’ll know what to do.”

Vale moves to my side. “Should I ask what just happened?”

I let my smile turn smug as I look up at him. “Do you mean to tell me there’s something the mighty Prince Abelin Vale of the Summer Court doesn’t know?”

He pulls me into his arms, and his eyes glow like honey as he says, “I’ve told you more than once to call me Vale, pixie.”

Desire streaks through me as I realize we’re both still naked. “Why?” I ask, running the back of my hand over the scruff on his jaw. “Why do you use your middle name?”

A hint of pain moves through his eyes. “My mother called me Vale. It reminds me of her.”

I press my palm to his heart, my fingertips resting on the rays of the sun. “Then I’ll never call you anything else.”

He kisses the curve of my eyebrow. “I hope you’ll call me yours.”

“I do, my prince.” I nuzzle my cheek against his stubbled one. “I do.”

He holds me for a moment, then eases back. “So, what’s with the letter in the fire?”

I smile as I bat my wings lazily against the air. “It’s a uniquely pixie form of communication. That message will go straight to Mab. I asked for her help. If there’s a way to break your vow, she’ll know.”

“You’re sure?”

“Pixies are experts in matters of the heart.”

“Well,” he murmurs, sliding his hands to my hips. “You’ve certainly captured mine.” As he grows harder against me, he moves a hand to my ass and dips his fingers between my cheeks. One finger grazes my opening, dabbling in his cum that still seeps from me. “Are you sore?” he asks in a voice rough with desire.

I sling my arms around his neck and go on tiptoe so I can whisper in his ear. “Not even a little bit.”

His shaky breath tickles my cheek. “So, we can…?”

“*Oui, mon prince*. Take me back to bed.”

CHAPTER 14

VALE

Izig trundles from the foyer with an armful of groceries. After five days in Jasper's apartment, my butler doesn't bother knocking anymore. Of course, some of his stealth is due to a reluctance to alert Jasper's neighbors. Nearly a week has passed, and their nosiness shows no signs of abating.

As Izig enters the kitchen, his eyes flick to Jasper's bedroom door.

"He's in the shower," I say, rising from the sofa to join Izig in the kitchen. "Thanks for grabbing the groceries. Truly, I appreciate it."

He grunts and sets the bags on the counter. "You were right to send me, sir. Nobody pays me any mind. You're far more noticeable."

My heart aches at his assessment of himself. But he's right. Small things are often deemed inconsequential and overlooked. That's exactly why I sent Bert, Mert, and Sully to the Summer Court.

"Thank you," I say again, unpacking the groceries. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Izig."

The merest hint of pink tinges his wart-covered cheeks. "It was no trouble." He gestures to the groceries. "Olives. Fancy cheese. French bread." He glances at the bedroom door again. "Is there a romantic picnic in your future, sir?"

I know why he's asking. Jasper and I have been lying low ever since Tower du Sang weakened the geas. If Zaphira was bold enough to tamper with my memories, there's no telling what she'll do to ensure I go through with the wedding. If Izig suspects I'm going to leave the apartment, he'll undoubtedly have something to say about it.

I smile. "Yes, old friend, but the romance won't leave the living room."

The bedroom door swings open and Jasper saunters through, drying his hair with a towel. He's shirtless, the bars through his nipples gleaming in the afternoon light that streams through the terrace doors. Low-slung sweatpants accentuate the bulge between his thighs. He flings his towel over his shoulder as he enters the kitchen, then rises on tiptoe and presses a tender kiss to my lips.

As soon as his shower-warmed skin brushes mine, I grab his hips and yank him against me.

"Oh," he murmurs against my mouth. "Hello, Your Highness." His blue eyes sparkle with mischief as my erection grazes his dick. "*Both* of Your Highnesses."

Izig clears his throat.

Jasper turns to him with a bright smile. "Hey, Ziggy."

My butler's eyes widen slightly at the nickname. "Good afternoon, Master Jasper." Izig looks at me. "If you don't need anything further, sire, I thought I might take a walk by the Hudson."

"Enjoy yourself, Izig."

My butler inclines his head. As he turns and moves toward the foyer, Jasper leans on the counter.

“We need to find you a girl, Izig.”

Izig spins, a slightly horrified look on his wart-covered face.

Jasper tilts his head. “Or maybe a guy?”

Izig folds his brawny arms, stretching his suit jacket. “No, thank you. I don’t want matchmaking from a pixie.”

Jasper chuckles. “Oh, come on. I bet I can guess your type. I’m thinking tall and—”

“*No*, thank you,” Izig says firmly. He mumbles something under his breath and disappears down the hallway. A moment later, the front door opens and closes.

Jasper straightens from the counter, a pleased look on his face. “He loves me. He won’t say it, of course. Big, strong ogre, and all. But I can tell.”

“Izig’s affection runs deep,” I say, “but it’s under the surface. His family has served mine for generations. You’ll never hear him utter the word *love* unless he’s talking about chocolate-filled croissants. Spicy dark chocolate, to be exact.”

Jasper grins. “A man after my own heart. Dark chocolate is the *only* chocolate.”

I grab him around the waist and pull him into me so we’re chest to chest. “No one else is allowed to have your heart. Only me. Because no one else will ever have mine. It’s yours, Jasper. Every bit of me belongs to you.”

His gaze turns thoughtful as he brings a hand to my chest and strokes the edges of my sun tattoo through my shirt. Behind him, his wings sift pale blue dust so fine it disappears before it touches the ground. Silence stretches until discomfort steals through me.

“Jasper,” I say. “Look at me.” When his blue eyes lift to mine, I tighten my arms around him. “There are still tender spaces between us. I know I can’t fix all of them in a week, but I’m determined to try anyway. I’m a brawler by nature, baby, and there’s never been a more important fight than this one. Right here, right now. You and me.”

He tips his head toward the groceries. “Is that what this is all about? Fixing things?”

“I’m a Frenchman,” I murmur, reaching around his hip and stroking the delicate edge of his wing. “Food is one of my love languages.”

His eyes roll back in his head as a shiver passes through him.

“Feel good?” I ask quietly.

His response comes on a groan. “You have no idea.”

I chuckle. “We need more wing play, my love.”

He opens his eyes, his expression abruptly sober. “We need more of everything. Including time.”

Fear dampens my growing arousal. The wedding is in six days. We haven’t heard from Mab. There’s been no word from Bert, Mert, or Sully, either. Jasper and I are in a holding pattern, hunkered down in his apartment like a couple of hunted animals. Zaphira is responsible for our helplessness and, right now, I don’t see any way of outmaneuvering her. Not without risking Jasper’s safety.

But I'm determined not to let my frustration interfere with this opportunity to make things right with Jasper. Gripping him around the waist, I lift him and set him on the counter amid the scattered groceries. Then I step between his legs and tip his chin up.

“We’ll figure this out,” I promise, brushing my lips over his. “In the meantime, we still have to eat, so I’m going to give you a picnic in front of the fire. I’d rather take you outside and watch you laugh under the sun, but it’s December and cold as fuck in this city.”

He laughs softly. “It’s cold just about everywhere.”

I take his hand and splay his fingers over my heart. “Not in here. Not for you.”

His voice goes husky. “That’s very romantic, Your Highness.”

"It's the truth."

For a long moment, we just stare at each other, lust and other emotions sparkling in the air between us. My heart thumps faster, and he curls his fingers against my chest.

"Vale," he whispers.

"I know," I say, and I'm not quite sure what I mean. But my body seems to. More importantly, Jasper does, too, because he leans in just as I tangle my hand in his hair and tug his head back. A growl rumbles in my chest as I kiss my way up his throat before seizing his lips in a rough kiss. I grunt as I press my aching dick against his, which is rock-hard and so irresistible I slip a hand under his waistband. He's not wearing underwear, and I seize his dick and stroke the silky length. I swipe my thumb over his leaking slit and work moisture down his shaft.

"F-Fuck," he gasps against my lips. He squeezes my shoulder as he rolls his hips, thrusting hard into my hand. A groan rips from his throat. "You gotta stop. I'll come."

"Do you want to?"

"Yes," he gasps. "No." With a shaky laugh, he seizes my wrist. "You got all this food. I don't want to ruin your idea."

I pull my hand from his sweats and cup his jaw. "You won't. The food will keep, baby."

He shakes his head. "Let's wait. Call me greedy, but I really want you to fuck me later."

Lust bolts straight to my dick, and I groan as I ease my hips away from his. "If you keep saying stuff like that, we'll never eat again."

A mischievous smile plays around his mouth. "There's something to be said for anticipation, my prince."

"Just give me an appetizer," I murmur, and I kiss him while he's still smiling. A few breathless moments later, we part, both of us flushed and way too aroused for comfort.

"We should probably eat, right?" Jasper asks as I adjust my aching dick. He darts a look at the abandoned food. "Otherwise, I'm going to make a very big mess all over your camembert."

Laughing, I pull him from the counter and swat his ass. *"Ouais."* Yeah. "Food first, fun later."

A wicked smile curves his lips as he holds up a thick length of pepperoni. "But not too much later."

Laughing and flirting, we work side by side as we prepare lunch. Jasper finds a charcuterie board, and I slice the cheese and meat while he arranges grapes, olives, and nuts into little islands. Our conversation is easy, and several times my shoulders shake so hard I have to pause my knife so I don't cut myself.

It's always this way with him. The thought materializes in my mind with clarity as clear and bright as a diamond. My memories are spotty. Bits and pieces of our stolen time come and go. But my instinct is still razor-sharp. I can trust that. And every bit of instinct points to Jasper. He's mine.

Jasper holds up a baguette, his eyes glinting with mischief. "Do you remember the last time we talked about French bread?"

I take it from him and plant a rough, quick kiss on his lips. With a wink, I smack the bread lightly against his ass. "It's called a baguette, pixie."

"Oui oui, mon prince." Grinning, he heads for the living room. Halfway there, he tosses me a saucy look over his shoulder. "You're still contracted to serve as my boon, you know. So you carry the food."

Shaking my head, I obey, setting the charcuterie board on the coffee table while he spreads a blanket before the fireplace. He pops grapes in his mouth as I fetch wine and glasses. When we're settled before the fire with the food between us, I hand him a glass of wine.

"This is the kind of service I can get used to." He takes a healthy sip and gestures to me with his glass. "Would be better if you weren't wearing pants, though. Or a shirt."

I laugh as I pour a glass for myself. "You're incorrigible."

"Just a bowtie, then. And I don't mean around your neck."

We spend the next thirty minutes eating and teasing each other as the fire dances in the hearth. Eventually, I push the coffee table aside and lean my back against the edge of the sofa. Jasper lounges between my legs, his back to my chest and his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my forearm.

"So," he says, "have you remembered anything else?"

I stroke the curve of one gossamer wing, which he tucked close to his hip when he settled against me. "Nothing new." I gesture to the charcuterie board beside us. "I wanted to do this for you, but I was also hoping it might jog my memory. I hate that I can't trust it. That there are holes in our time together." Anger sparks in my chest, turning my voice into a growl. "I'm going to make sure Zaphira answers for that."

Jasper turns in my arms. Worry clouds his blue eyes, and I touch his cheek.

"What is it, baby?" I ask.

He hesitates. "We haven't heard from Sully or Bert. Do you think Zaphira would hurt them?"

I can't lie to him, not even to spare him pain. But I won't worry him unnecessarily, either. "Sulien isn't an ordinary cat. He was born in the Taranathen Forest when the magic beyond the Veil was at its zenith. If he doesn't want to be seen, no one will notice his presence." I smile as I rub a thumb over Jasper's high cheekbone. "And I have a feeling your Bert is just as magical."

Jasper smiles. "He is."

"How did you two meet?"

Humor dances in Jasper's eyes. "Nothing too dramatic or awe-inspiring, I'm afraid. I almost stepped on him in a bar. Then I took him home and helped him through a bad hangover." As I chuckle, Jasper resettles in my arms and resumes stroking my arm. "Tell me about when you first met Sully. How did you know he was the right familiar for you?" Jasper turns his head and looks up at me, blue eyes twinkling. "Fated mates, so to speak."

I laugh at his description until a sobering thought hits me. "Have we talked about this before?"

He shakes his head. "I'd like to hear about it now, though. Tell me some stories, my prince. Even if you can't remember telling me the first time, I'd like to hear them again."

My heart squeezes. I wrap my arms around him and let my cheek graze his. As the fire crackles and dances before us, I tell him of my life.

We talk for hours. About Sully and my mother. About my childhood growing up in the Summer Court. About my father's marriage to Zaphira and the bad behaviors I fell into as I struggled to adjust to the coldness she brought to my father's court. The only subject we don't discuss is Liriel. She's the one topic neither of us seems able to bring up. It's too harsh of a reminder that my wedding is mere days away.

Through the terrace doors, the sky deepens from blue to navy to black. Every moment Jasper and I reconnect drives home what I already know: I'll cast duty aside to keep him. I'll take on Zaphira publicly if I have to. But I've got to be smart. She's wily, and she's clearly determined to see the wedding through. It's only a matter of time before she finds me—or worse, Jasper.

As the fire burns low, he moves his hand to my thigh, his fingers kneading and stroking a slow path upward. Just as I allow my desire to flow unfettered, the fire roars back to life. The flames change color, flaring from orange to dark green.

Jasper sits up abruptly. The flames continue to dance, the color shifting to emerald. A second

later, a letter flies from the blaze.

He plucks it from the air and turns to me with an excited expression. “It’s from Mab! Gods, I hope she has some answers.”

My heart pounds as he rips the letter open and scans it. His excitement dies, his jaw going tight. When he looks up, his blue eyes are stark. “She says the same thing as Fuoco. Only the being who set the geas can remove it.”

“What about my vow?”

Jasper shakes his head. “Mab says she can’t break it.”

Bitter disappointment chokes me. Jasper reaches for me, and I pull him into my arms and bury my face in his hair. He smells of sandalwood and wine and the body cream he slathers on after he showers. As I hold him, the edges of his wings turn the gray color of cold rain. His shoulders shake, and a hiccuping sob breaks from his throat.

“No,” I say, kissing his temple. “We’re not giving up.”

“But what are we gonna do?” He pushes away, his blue eyes as dark as a bruise. “We’re out of options.”

I take the crumpled note from his fingers and stuff it in my pocket. Then I maneuver us so my back is against the sofa and he’s straddling me. I reach around him and stroke my hand down his spine, running a firm thumb over the strong muscles that support his wings.

He groans, his head falling forward. “Gods, that feels good.”

“That’s what I’m going to do,” I say softly. When he lifts his head, I move my hand to the back of his neck and massage. “I’m going to make you feel good. First, I’m going to get the tension out of these muscles, baby. And then I’m going to make love to you. We can talk about everything else later.”

His smile is sad. “Sex won’t solve our problems.”

“Not sex.” I run my fingers over the delicate, iridescent membrane of one wing. “Love, Jasper. I love you. That’s the only option I’m interested in.”

“I’m afraid,” he whispers, his wing shivering under my touch.

“Me too. But I’m also very fucking determined to keep you.” Bringing my hands to his hips, I kiss him. He opens immediately, moaning as our tongues meet and stroke. The kiss quickly turns heated, and I pull his sweats down, freeing his dick. I cup his tight, swollen balls before sliding a finger back and teasing his hole.

With a soft, sexy cry, he grinds his hips, the damp tip of his cock slicking my stomach.

“Take these off,” I whisper, tugging at his sweats. As he scrambles to obey, I pull my shirt over my head and wriggle out of my pants and boxer briefs. The latter tangle around one ankle, and Jasper rips them off and flings them across the room before straddling my thighs once more.

“There,” he says with a satisfied sound. “My favorite mount.”

Widening my thighs a little, I grasp my leaking, aching dick and slap it lightly against his stomach. “You forgot the most important part of your saddle.”

A blond eyebrow sails upward. “Oh, is it important?”

With a playful growl, I dig my fingers into his ribs and tickle him. “*Very*, pixie.” His laughter turns into squirming, which quickly turns into panting and thrusting. He takes both of our rigid cocks in hand, and my breathing goes ragged as he strokes us together.

“Yeah,” I grunt, resting the back of my head against the sofa as I squeeze his hips hard. “So fucking good, baby.”

“You think I’m good?” he rasps, his blue eyes locked with mine as he works our dicks.

“Mmm. The best.”

Sensual satisfaction gleams in his gaze. "You're *so* right about that, my prince. But I can be even better." He slides down my body so he's on his hands and knees between my legs. Sinking to his elbows, he thrusts his ass high in the air and grasps the base of my shaft. With a look hot enough to melt glass, he wraps his pouty lips around my cock and takes me straight to the back of his throat.

"Gods," I wheeze, my hips lifting. I clutch his head as his hot, perfect mouth envelopes me and lightning zips down my spine. He bobs his head, sucking up and down my length. Getting me slick as he works his clever tongue all around my shaft and over my cockhead. He kneads my balls gently with my free hand before pressing two firm fingers to the sensitive skin behind my sack.

"Fuck!" I cry, thrusting hard. Fucking his mouth. I don't want to gag him, but I can't stop when he feels so good. When he looks so damn beautiful with the firelight dancing over his smooth skin and his shimmering wings and his insane ass. Panting, I sit up enough to run a hand over one round cheek before delving into his cleft.

He moans around my dick and bows his spine, thrusting his ass higher.

"Yeah," I rasp, sucking my fingers into my mouth before carrying them back to his crease. I tease his pucker as he continues sucking me. "Let me make you feel good, baby."

He nods as he sucks me, his hand working in tandem with his mouth. Pressure builds at the base of my spine, but I shove the orgasm away and continue fingering him. I don't want to come just yet. I need this to last a little longer. Our moments are slipping by so fast, and I need time to stop ticking.

The fire pops, bathing us in a soft glow. When Jasper sucks hard on the upstroke, I push him away as I cling to the edge of release by my fingertips. For one tense moment, I squeeze my eyes shut as I struggle not to come.

He rests his cheek against my thigh, his warm breath fluttering over my skin. "The first time we slept together, it was like this. In front of a fire. Do you remember?" His tone is curious but underscored by sadness.

I search my memory as I stroke both of his wings from base to tip. Silence stretches. "No," I admit. "There are flashes of you and me together in my bed in Villette. I don't remember a fire."

Jasper lifts his head. His blue eyes shine with unshed tears. "Let's make new memories, Vale. I hope we get the old ones back, but if we don't, I want new ones with you."

Assuming we get a chance to make them. That part hangs unspoken between us, but I hear it all the same.

"We will," I say, and I seal the promise with a kiss. It's tender at first, but soon the need to possess him completely takes over, and my mouth grows wild and hungry on his. I stretch him on his back on the blanket and kiss my way down his body, nipping at his throat, his collarbones, his pierced nipples. I run my tongue into the dips of his abs before kissing his twitching dick.

"Vale," he gasps, pulling at my hair as he lifts his hips. "You have to fuck me."

"I can't."

He rises to his elbows and glares at me. "Why the fuck not?"

Smiling, I seize his thighs and flip him onto his stomach. As he sputters, I press his cheeks apart. "Because I haven't had any dessert, and I'm craving something sweet." Holding him open, I bury my face in his ass.

Jasper goes limp. "Puck's knee socks, don't stop doing that."

My smile turns into a chuckle as I lick a circle around his hole. He spreads his legs wider, and I take it for the invitation it is and massage his balls as I rim his ass, opening him with my tongue. His moans and satisfied sighs fill the room, every sexy sound driving my lust higher.

As goosebumps lift on his thighs, I lick a stripe down his crack to his balls. I suckle them,

tonguing each soft globe, before taking his swollen dick into my mouth and sucking him from behind.

"Vale!" he chokes out, lifting onto his knees as he claws at the blanket. "I'm gonna come," he pants, rocking back hard.

I pop off his dick and push a finger into his damp entrance. "No, you're not," I say firmly, using my finger in his ass to force him flat onto his stomach again. As he whimpers and clutches the blanket, I bite his ass cheek before climbing to my feet. "Turn over."

"Where are you going?" he demands as he rolls onto his back, his lips as pink and wet as his cock. "Oh," he says as I grab a bottle of lube from one of the side tables. "I forgot I put that there."

"*I* put it there," I say, kneeling between his thighs and dripping moisture onto my shaft. I slick myself before fingering lube into his opening.

He manages to give me a snarky look even as he shudders and clamps his hole around my questing finger. "You put a lot of planning into this picnic, huh?"

I sink another finger inside him and let a little cockiness leak into my smile. "Baby, *this* was the plan."

"Well—oh fuck, Vale—it's working." He pulls his knees to his chest, putting himself on display. "But if you don't get inside me right now, I'm going to throw you over the balcony."

"Noted, baby." I laugh as I grab my dick and brush it over his hole. As he shudders, I drag my cockhead up and down his cleft. Sparks shoot down the backs of my thighs. Pleasure coils like a snake at the base of my spine. Eyes locked with Jasper's, I call my power. Light bursts from the lines of my tattoo, sunlight spreading from my chest to the base of my dick. It vibrates against Jasper's ass as I press my hips forward, pushing my cockhead inside him.

He keens, his plump lips open on a desperate cry.

"Tell me how much you want this," I command, holding onto my control by a thread. "How much you need this. Only me. Only ever me."

"Only you," he pants. "I love you, Vale. Only you. Give it to me, please!" His cries rise higher as I press forward slowly, pleasure engulfing me as I watch my thick length disappear inside him. When I'm fully seated, I plant my forearms on either side of his head and seize his mouth in a sloppy kiss. He digs his fingers into my hair and bites at my lips. His ass clamps hard around my shaft, and I suck in a breath as desire crackles through me.

"You're going to make me come," I growl against his mouth as I start to move. I rock my hips and stare into his eyes, my thrusts jostling him on the blanket. "You feel so good with your tight, perfect ass gripping me. I can't last long, baby. You're going to steal my cum from me the same way you stole my heart."

"Fuck me," he breathes, his ankles on my shoulders and his breath puffing over my face. "Fuck me, Vale. *Gods*, it's so good. So deep. Don't stop."

"I'm not," I grunt, thrusting harder. Snapping my hips as sweat drips from my forehead and the sound of my dick squishing into his hole cranks my lust so high I think I might combust. "I'm not stopping. I'm giving you everything, and you're going to take it. Isn't that right?"

"Yes!" he cries, throwing his head back. His toes curl, and the tendons in his neck go taunt. His ass clenches rhythmically around me. My skin grows brighter, rays of sunlight spilling over Jasper's skin. The tattoo around my dick vibrates with every thrust.

We cry out together, lost in each other. He says my name over and over, the word spilling from him like a prayer as he threatens to fly apart beneath me. My power surges, painting ribbons of light over his sweat-slicked chest and delicate jaw. His flushed cheekbones and the long sweep of his lashes.

His wings glow golden at the edges. With a wild cry, he grabs his flailing dick and pumps it hard.

"Yeah," I grit out, thrusting so hard and fast the *slap, slap, slap* of my hips against his ass drowns out the fire in the hearth. "Come for me, baby. Every drop."

He gives his dick another quick stroke. Then he comes on a loud cry, creamy cum spurting in thick stripes that land as high as his chin.

That's what finishes me off. Pulling out, I jack my cock furiously, bliss rolling over me in fiery waves as I come all over his ass. Jasper groans and pulls his legs back, his splayed thighs and cum-covered chest so fucking gorgeous I cry out as more cum shoots from my dick.

"Yes," he gasps, his eyes glittering with something sexy and fierce. "Give it to me, Vale." He reaches down and strokes his fingers over his quivering entrance. "Fill me up."

Shuddering and gasping for breath, I drag my cockhead through a thick glob of cum and push it inside him. We moan, both of us shaking, as I repeat the motion, pushing the evidence of my possession so deep inside him I think I must eventually touch his heart.

I collapse on top of him with my dick lodged to the hilt and my heart racing so fast I can't catch my breath. We kiss again, and I'm burning alive. When this fades, there will be nothing left of me but fucking cinders. And somewhere deep in that pile of ash, Jasper will be the flickering ember that stokes me back to life. Our love is a phoenix. Zaphira might have killed us once, but we'll rise again. Over and over and over. Our love will never die.

It can't.

It won't.

Because I'll never let Jasper go.

TWO HOURS LATER, JASPER LIES ON HIS BACK IN BED, HIS SOFT SNORES FILLING THE QUIET ROOM. ONE arm is flung over his head, the other draped across his stomach. The sheets are still tangled around his legs from our second round of lovemaking.

I sit on the edge of the mattress by his hip and stroke blond locks away from his forehead. Running my hand down his neck to his chest, I place my palm over his heart. The steady beat is as comforting as the sun's rays warming my skin. It's like Jasper found all the horrible, empty parts of me and filled them with love and light.

"I'll think of something," I promise even though he's not awake to hear me. "I will never let you go. Never." It's a promise to myself, too. I can't live with the lifeless chill of winter bearing down on me. I can't live without this pixie in my bed. In my mind.

In my heart.

Maybe I could have suffered through a loveless marriage before I found him. But now? There's no fucking way.

With a final, lingering look at Jasper, I rise and go to the main terrace off the living room. As I step outside, a wintry blast penetrates my clothes and steals my breath. Goosebumps cover my skin as I rub my arms to ward off the cold. The frigid air almost feels like a warning—a reminder that Zaphira's icy tentacles can reach me anywhere.

But that type of thinking won't help me. I've got to break my vow without dying, and I can't hide in the Hallows anymore. If Jasper and I are going to have a future together, I have to take some risks. Izig could stay with him while I return to Paris and confront Zaphira. Jasper won't like it, but I don't

see any other options. I can't take him with me. If Zaphira got her hands on him…

Shoving down a growl, I study the city. It's still early in the night, but the Hallows is quiet. The whole world seems poised, its breath held as it awaits the next play in this deadly game of chess.

A tiny blue bird flits to the balcony railing, his delicate talons tight on the worn metal. He flaps his wings wildly, seemingly agitated. The hair on my nape lifts, and apprehension niggles in the back of my mind.

"What's wrong?" I ask. "Do you need help?" Maybe I should wake Jasper.

The bird darts forward and pecks me hard on the shoulder before zipping into the air and hovering out of reach.

"Hey!" I exclaim, rubbing at the spot. "What was that for?"

The bird hangs in the air, his wings beating so fast I can barely track their movements. Then he dives toward the street.

I lean over the railing. Below, the bird flies low to the ground and circles a dark shadow in the middle of the street.

I squint, struggling to make it out. Then I see it.

A black hat. A *bowler* hat.

Oh, fuck.

Heart pounding, I whirl and run for the bedroom. I'm halfway across the living room when the sound of the front door crashing open booms from the foyer. Seconds later, elven warriors with long, white hair fill the hallway. They're dressed in the colors of my father's court, but these are Winter Court elves. Each one wears a metal snowflake pinned to his chest.

"Hello, Prince Abelin," one of the men says. "We meet again."

A memory rushes back—the elf sneering before slamming a carriage door in my face. "You," I rasp, anger pounding through me.

Jasper stumbles from his bedroom wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt.

"Run!" I yell, stepping between him and the elves. "Go to the balcony and jump for the next one over!"

The warriors surge forward. "Go!" I scream at Jasper as a fist streaks toward me. I duck, then pop up and punch the first warrior in the jaw. As his head flies back, the others rush me.

"Vale!" Jasper cries.

"Run!" I shout as elves slam into me, trying to pull me to the ground. I break free and spin as two guards head toward Jasper. He raises his fists, but a guard backhands him. Jasper's head snaps back, blood spraying from his lip. He falls to his knees.

Red descends over my vision. Hands grab at me, but I roar and shake them off. I make it two steps when a guard seizes Jasper by the wing and yanks him to his feet. The wing crunches, and Jasper screams.

I bellow my rage and call on my power, tapping the battle magic reserved for the direst circumstances. The sun's heat boils me from the inside out as I summon every shred of light that dwells within me. With another roar, I thrust my hands out. Light streaks from my fingers in a glowing blade and strikes the elves holding Jasper. Terror flashes in their eyes just before they disappear in a puff of ash.

Movement behind me.

Jasper flings out a hand, his gaze on something over my shoulder. "No!"

I spin, but it's too late.

Pain blooms at the back of my head.

I fall, Jasper's screams in my ears as icicles drag down my spine. I must hit the floor, but I don't feel the impact as black snowflakes overtake my vision.

And then there's nothing.

CHAPTER 15

JASPER

The second I open my eyes, I know it's a mistake. For one thing, the world is blurry. Also, I'm as hungover as a demon getting his horns sharpened for the first time. I slam my eyes shut as needles stab my skull and nausea reenacts the ocean in my gut.

"Fuck," I mutter, taking shallow breaths. Wherever I partied last night, it must have been incredible. But damn if I'm not paying the price for it now. Bert is going to lecture me for days. He gets so sanctimonious whenever I indulge in—

I give a strangled gasp as my memories crash back.

Vale.

They took Vale.

"Vale!" I cry, struggling to sit up. Dimly, I realize I'm lying on some sort of bed. I fumble with the blankets as I swing my legs over the side. I get a glimpse of an elegant bedroom before pain lances my wing, making me suck in a sharp breath as a fresh wave of nausea hits me.

"Oh no," a soft voice says. "Take it easy." The scent of lilies surrounds me. A second later, gentle but firm fingers grip my shoulders and ease me back down. "You must rest," the voice says. "If you hurt your wing again, I'm not sure Ceri can mend it."

I go still. The world comes slowly into focus, revealing a woman frowning down at me.

No. Not a woman—an *elf*. And a familiar one. I've seen her before, when I stood in the queue to ask the dragon Gazzag for a flight back to the Hallows. On that occasion, she faced Vale with the details of her wedding printed between them in graceful calligraphy.

"You're Princess Liriel," I say.

Surprise registers in her eyes, which are wide and blue and fringed by curly black lashes. Her long, white-blond hair is caught back from her face, exposing the pointed tips of her ears. Her features are lovely, her skin as smooth as glass. Embroidered snowflakes march along the neckline of her light-blue gown, which hugs a slender, feminine figure. The bedroom behind her is decorated in the same pale blue as her dress.

"You know me?" she asks, her tone curious but kind.

I lever myself up, wincing as more pain zips across my wing. "I've seen the wedding announcements," I say, curving the injured wing inward so I can get a look at it. A fresh bruise covers the membrane.

But that's not the bad part. The edge is torn. If it doesn't heal—and tears sometimes don't—I'll never fly again. "Damn," I say, panic fluttering in my stomach. "Just my fucking luck."

"Here." Liriel leans a hip on the bed, sending more lily-scented air flowing around me. She reaches for my wing, then hesitates. "May I? I'm a decent healer." I must look skeptical, because she

offers a soft smile. “If I wanted to harm you, I would have done it while you were unconscious. Besides, I already healed the bruise on your jaw.”

I touch my face, memories of the Winter Court warriors swarming the apartment flashing through my head. Dread stabs through me. “Where’s Vale?”

Liriel sobers. “He’s uninjured, but my mother is holding him prisoner in one of the ice cells.”

“Is an ice cell exactly what it sounds like?”

She nods. Then she glances over her shoulder and drops her voice just below a whisper. “I’ve long suspected my mother has spies who watch King Nylian. I think she found out he allowed Vale to travel to the Americas, and she had Vale followed. Once she discovered he was with you, she decided to kidnap him and hold him until the wedding.” Liriel’s eyes harden, and her beautiful features contort in a look of disgust. “My mother is obsessed with making this wedding happen.”

A telltale tingling spreads down my spine.

Magic. The matchmaking gift I inherited from my grandfather. It’s not limited to bringing people together. Sometimes, it lets me know when people prefer to remain apart.

“But you aren’t?” I ask Liriel.

“Gods, no.” She shakes her head vigorously, making a thick length of hair slide over her shoulder. “Vale is nice enough, but he’s not my type.” Her gaze softens. “And I think you know I’m not his.”

Despite my shitty circumstances, I can’t help but return her smile. “I have an inkling.”

Without warning, a fuzzy head pokes from under the hem of Liriel’s gown. Bright blue eyes blink at me, curiosity and intelligence burning in the sapphire depths.

“Oh!” Liriel exclaims. Smiling, she bends and lifts a fluffy white fox into her arms. “This is Neve, my familiar.” Liriel smoothes a hand down the animal’s luxurious-looking fur. “She’s a little shy.”

Before I can say anything, the door opens, and another beautiful elven woman walks in. A parrot perches on her shoulder. The woman stops short at the sight of Liriel seated on the edge of my bed. Then she frowns.

“He’s not supposed to be sitting up!” She advances on the bed, her long yellow skirts swishing. Her hair is shorter than Liriel’s and plaited in two braids the color of honey left in the sun. Freckles dust her nose, which turns up adorably at the end. The parrot’s scarlet breast feathers are a dazzling contrast to her bright gown. The woman’s leaf-green eyes narrow as she stops at the foot of the bed and gives me a stern look. “Do you want to spend the rest of your life on the ground, pixie?”

On her shoulder, the parrot tilts its head and mimics her expression as it stares me down. Its blue and yellow tail feathers trail over her shoulder.

Liriel angles her hand next to her lips and speaks to me out of the corner of her mouth. “In a good cop, bad cop scenario, I’m the good cop and Ceridwen is most definitely the bad cop.” Her lips twitch. “She’s also a much better healer than I am.”

“It’s not a competition, Your Highness,” Ceridwen says.

“Murder!” the parrot screeches, one beady black eye pinned on me.

Ceridwen reaches up and taps its beak. “Sherlock! You can’t just blurt that out every time you meet someone.” She gives me an apologetic look. “I’m so sorry, Jasper.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “A lot of people want to murder me when they first meet me.”

“Oh no, he didn’t mean it that way,” Ceridwen says. “Sherlock loves detective novels.” She looks at the parrot. “Don’t you, Sherlock?”

“Whodunit!”

“Exactly,” Ceridwen says. She gives the parrot a no-nonsense look. “But you could still greet our guest properly.”

The parrot looks at me and bobs his head. "'Ello," he squawks in a Cockney accent.

Ceridwen gives him another pointed look as she moves around the bed. She sits opposite Liriel and runs a critical gaze over my wing. The sternness fades from her eyes as she offers me a reassuring smile. "It's not as bad as it looks."

"Oh," I say, relief coursing through me. "Thank the gods." I flutter my uninjured wing as I look from Ceridwen to Liriel. "My wings aren't good for much beyond short hops, but I'd definitely miss the hops."

Liriel grins. "Ceri will fix you up." She reaches over my legs and grasps the other woman's hand. "She's the finest healer in any court."

Ceri's cheeks go pink. "I don't know about that."

"I do," Liriel insists, her amusement fading to something more intimate as she gazes at Ceri. "You don't give yourself enough credit."

My magic sparks in a rush of effervescence like champagne bubbles tickling my veins. If I'm not mistaken, Princess Liriel has no problem with a wedding—as long as Ceri is waiting for her at the end of the aisle.

"How long have you two known each other?" I ask.

Liriel startles, her cheeks going as pink as Ceri's. She snatches her hand from the other woman's arm and casts a quick look around the room. "Um, forever, really. Ceri is my lady-in-waiting."

I look around the room, too, apprehension crawling through me. If Zaphira spies on her husband, she probably spies on her daughter, as well.

Especially if she suspects Liriel might not be keen on marrying Vale.

Puck's pierced taint, I can't escape matchmaking even in the middle of a kidnapping. On the other hand, if Liriel is in love with her lady-in-waiting, she could be exactly the sort of ally Vale and I need right now.

I lean toward Liriel and pitch my voice low. "Will your mother hurt Vale?"

She and Ceri exchange a nervous look. Then Liriel speaks in the same hushed tone. "Not where anyone could see. She knows the king would have her head."

"Where is the king?" As soon as the question leaves my lips, anger coils in my chest. Nylian isn't much of a monarch—or father—if he can't stop his wife from imprisoning his own son.

"King Nylian never comes here," Liriel says, worry in her eyes. "This is my mother's estate. Every guard in the manor answers solely to her, and she's spelled them so they can't speak against her. I doubt His Majesty is even aware that Vale is in Paris."

Ceri snorts softly. "And your mother probably fed him a line of bullshit to stop him from asking questions."

"Keep your voice down," Liriel says, looking around again. Neve must sense her distress, because the little fox places a fuzzy paw on Liriel's arm.

Ceri's expression goes contrite. She and Liriel exchange a meaningful look, and then Ceri gestures to my wing. "I believe I can heal it, but it'll probably take more than one session. Do you want me to try?"

"Fuck, yes." I glance at Liriel. "I mean, yes, please."

Liriel smiles. "The first one worked just fine."

Grinning, I fold my wing toward Ceri. "In that case, please fix my fucking wing."

Ceri laughs softly as she grips the edge. Her smile fades as she stares intently at the tear. On her shoulder, Sherlock once again adopts a similar expression as his mistress.

After a second, Ceri's hand begins to glow. The golden light spreads like the sun peeking above

the horizon. Rays touch the tear, which slowly starts to knit back together. Heat suffuses my wing, and the sensation is so much like basking in Vale's power that tears prick my eyes.

Liriel grips my hand, her blue gaze full of understanding.

Sweat beads on Ceri's brow. Her skin pales, her freckles standing out boldly. Sherlock brushes his sleek head against her temple as if he means to comfort her. The golden light envelopes him, too, gilding his feathers and setting his round eyes shimmering.

Vibrations frazzle through my wing. The two edges of the tear press tightly together and shine like someone painted a golden stripe down the center. The heat flares higher, and then Ceri releases me with a gasp.

The light winks out.

I examine my wing. A combination of relief and awe spread through me as I study the faint scar. I look at Ceri, who watches me with a satisfied expression. "Thank you, Ceri. That was brilliant."

Pink touches her cheekbones again. "You're very welcome. We can do another round tomorrow. That should get rid of any scarring."

"Yes, please. I'm much too pretty to pull off a pirate look."

Ceri smiles as she rises. "I'll bring you something to eat. You're probably starving after that two-day flight."

My humor dies a swift death. "Two days?" But of course, she's right. Dragon back is the only reliable way to cross the ocean. If I've lost two days, that means the wedding is in—

"Three days," Liriel says, clearly discerning the source of my rising panic. "The winter solstice is in three days. If Vale and I don't say our vows by the time the clock strikes midnight on the solstice, we'll both die."

Ceri makes a muffled sound and presses slim fingers to her lips. Sherlock flutters his wings in an agitated movement.

My panic spirals higher, but I shove it down. "Is there any way I could speak to Vale?" I ask Liriel.

She shakes her head, regret in her eyes. "The dungeon is well-guarded. No one gets near it without my mother's permission."

My heart sinks, and I slump against the pillows as the reality of my situation sets in. How in the world am I going to get around an unbreakable elven vow? Mab couldn't help. I can't even see Vale, let alone talk to him. I have no way to contact Bert and Mert, assuming they're unharmed—and still alive.

No.

I refuse to acknowledge that as a possibility. I sit up as new resolve fills my chest. If I've learned anything over the six decades I've been matchmaking, it's that love is a potent form of magic. People like to underestimate it because it's not flashy or cool. But it's enduring. It fucking *persists*. Love thrives even in the bleakest, most inhospitable environments. Even in the coldest depths of winter.

Vow or not, Vale's evil stepmother isn't going to win. I have three days to save the man I love. If I fail, I won't just lose out on a life with Vale.

I'll lose him forever.

CHAPTER 16

VALE

I stare into an old-fashioned brazier in the bowels of Fourneclaire. Meager blue flames flicker among the coals—just another reminder from Zaphira that even the hottest of fires can be corrupted by winter.

My prison cell is six feet by eight feet and coated in a thin sheet of ice. The barred door never opens, although food appears whenever I nod off. A barred window high up on the wall reveals a dark sky. I woke here after the attack in the Hallows and haven't seen a single soul. I don't even know what day it is.

And I don't know if Jasper is okay. For the millionth time since I opened my eyes, the attack in the apartment plays through my head. *He's okay.* He has to be. I'd feel it if something happened to him. But even as I tell myself this, worry gnaws at me. Because the truth is, I don't know for sure.

All I know is that Zaphira is behind the attack—and my imprisonment. Undoubtedly, she plans on keeping me here until the moment I walk down the aisle.

I rub my arms for warmth as the stars outside wink playfully through the window. Grunting, I wander the cell for the hundredth time, yanking at the bars and checking for inconsistencies or weak points. After a frustrating half hour where nothing gives, I sit on the floor with my back to the wall. Drawing on my meager power reserves, I summon enough sunlight to melt the ice beneath me. The respite won't last long, and I'm not sure I'll have enough energy to do it again.

But I don't think Zaphira intends to starve me. She won't risk this wedding not happening.

That's the *only* thing I can count on.

A faint scratching sound draws my attention to the cell door. A second later, two small, furry bodies push through the spaces between the bars. *Mice.* My heart thumps faster as they scamper to me and sit on their haunches.

Hope soars in my chest. "Bert," I gasp, relief flooding me. I look at the other mouse. "Mert?"

The rodent nods, then releases a stream of high-pitched squeaks.

Frustration replaces my relief. I can't communicate with them. I glance at the cell door. "Is Sully with you?"

Bert squeaks. When I simply stare at him, the look in his dark eyes mirrors my frustration.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I don't understand." But the memory of Fuoco questioning Jasper gives me an idea. "Here," I tell the mice, holding out my palm. When they climb onto it, I bring them close to my face. "Let's do this. I'll ask questions, and you nod for *yes* and shake for *no*, okay?"

They dip their heads in unison, and I smile for the first time since I woke in my icy prison. But my next question wipes any humor from my heart.

"Is Jasper here?"

They nod.

My relief is so intense, it's a second before I can speak again. "Is he hurt?"

The mice look at each other. Bert nods as Mert shakes his head.

I frown. "What is that, a maybe?"

Bert and Mert look at each other again, and then Mert faces away, showing me his plump hindquarters. Bert waves a paw over Mert's back. Mert looks at me over his shoulder and bats his eyelashes.

"What…?" I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I don't— Wait, are you supposed to be Jasper?" As Mert nods enthusiastically, Bert waves his paw over Mert's back again. "Wings!" I exclaim. "Jasper hurt his wing!"

Both mice nod.

"But he'll be okay?"

The mice exchange a look I can't decipher.

"Have you talked to him?" I ask.

They shake their heads.

Confusion swamps me. "Have you seen him?"

Another shake, and my confusion grows.

"Have you seen Sulien?"

They nod.

My heart lifts. "What about Izig?"

Another nod. Bert jerks his head toward the cell door.

"He's outside?"

Bert gives me an exasperated look.

"He's in a cell," I amend.

Bert nods.

Fuck. Zaphira spells her ice cells so no sounds enter or exit. Izig could have been yelling for me since I arrived, and I'd have no idea. I can't do *anything* from where I sit. Once again, my stepmother pulls the strings, and everyone dances like her puppets.

"Do you have any information that can help me?" I ask the mice.

Bert places a paw on my wrist. Eyes solemn, he shakes his head.

A fresh wave of frustration fills me. Bert and Mert know Jasper hurt his wing, but they haven't seen him. And I can't unravel that mystery using our primitive form of communication. If only I could actually *talk* to them.

"Thanks, guys," I say softly, hearing the regret and fatigue in my voice as I lower the mice to the ground. They clamber off my palm, then watch as I pull Mab's note from my pocket. The paper looks a lot worse than it did when Jasper plucked it from the fire. It's my only link to him, and it's creased from all the times I've held it in the cell and run my fingers over the places where he touched it. As I unfold it now, Bert scratches at my arm hard enough to leave a mark.

Startled, I almost drop the note. "What is it?"

He tips his head toward the brazier.

"No way." I tighten my grip on the paper. "I'm not burning this."

Bert flicks his tail and releases an angry-sounding squeak. He points at the note, then runs to the brazier.

I look at Mert, who nods before copying Bert's actions. When he

reaches Bert, he swivels around so he faces away from me. Bert waves a paw over his brother's

back the same as he did when he tried to show me Jasper's wings.

A frown pulls at my brow as I watch the mice. Confusion growing, I lower my gaze to the paper. Bert and Mert are miming Jasper, but the note is from Mab…

I bring my head up sharply. "You want me to contact Mab."

Both mice let out pleased-sounding squeaks. Mert nudges his hip against Bert's, and they exchange a look like *finally, this dense elf gets it.*

I shake my head. "I can't contact Mab through the fire." Jasper's voice rings in my memory. *It's a uniquely pixie form of communication.* Before I saw Jasper throw the note into his fireplace, I had no idea pixies sent letters that way. Shame grips me as I realize I know far less about his culture than he does about mine. Even in the Summer Court, elves don't lower themselves to learn about pixies.

Except…pixies and elves share a common ancestor. My heart speeds up, and I stand and move toward the brazier.

Mert squeaks and beckons me closer.

"Our two species are distant cousins," I say, my breath puffing in the icy air. I reach the brazier and look down at the mice. "It could work."

They nod, twin expressions of approval in their dark eyes.

"Please let this work," I mutter, baring my fangs and biting the tip of my finger. Blood wells, and I touch my fingertip to the paper and scribble one word.

Help.

I fold the note and hold it over the flickering blue flames. "Um, please deliver this to Mab, Queen of the Pixies." Closing my eyes, I picture Jasper tipping his head back as the sun's rays slant over his face. Flames crackle, and I open my eyes and look down to see a regular fire burning among the coals. Holding my breath, I toss the paper into the flames.

Nothing happens.

"Damn," I murmur, defeat threatening to slump my shoulders. As I start to turn away, the flames shoot higher. Red sparks spill from the brazier like miniature fireworks. The flames change color, shifting from orange to yellow before settling on green.

I hold my breath.

The letter winks out of sight.

An hour later, I know Mab isn't going to show. I pace the cell, Bert and Mert tucked carefully inside my breast pocket. Uncertainty and fear war with my determination to get out of the elven bond.

Although, right now, I'd be happy just to get out of this fucking cell.

"Gods," I mutter, shoving a hand through my hair. My fingers are numb again, and I lower my hand and blow into my cupped palms.

A sudden twinkling in the sky outside the window makes me stop. Slowly, the twinkling becomes a glow and then an irritated-sounding voice chirps from the outside.

"Bars on the windows? Zaphira is really putting her whole heart into this bitchy villain thing."

Bert and Mert poke their heads above my pocket. My heart pounds as the twinkling light floats between the bars and moves to the center of the cell. It swells, and I throw up a hand as the glow blinds me. The air fills with pressure.

Pop!

The light disappears, and Queen Mab stands in the middle of the cell. Her hair is bubblegum pink and arranged in a messy bun on top of her head. She wears black combat boots, a black leather jacket, and a tutu the same shade as her hair.

She's also holding a wand with a little star on the end.

I blink to make sure I'm not dreaming. Or hallucinating. Probably, I'm hallucinating. I haven't eaten in a while.

Mab props a hand on her hip and gives me a cheeky look. "Well, Prince Vale, you're in a pickle."

"Uh…" I clear my throat as I look between Mab and the window. "I didn't know you could do… that."

"What?"

"Shrink."

"Oh, yeah, I'm a multitasker." She winks, her blue eyes the same brilliant shade as Jasper's. "You never know when you're gonna need to fit into a tight spot, am I right?" Before I can respond, she waves a manicured hand. "Plus, true love is like catnip for me. Oh! Speaking of catnip…" She puts her fingers to her mouth and whistles sharply.

In my pocket, Bert and Mert cover their ears.

Seconds later, Sulien slinks between the bars of the cell door and streaks toward me.

"Sully!" I go to one knee and then grunt when he plants his front paws on my shoulders, nearly knocking me over in the process. Joy bursts in my chest as he swipes his scratchy tongue over my cheek.

"Vale," he says through our bond, his mental voice strained. *"I'm sorry I couldn't come to you right away. Your stepmother has guards around every corner."*

"Don't worry about it," I say out loud as I stand and rub between his ears. "I'm just glad you're safe."

"Fourneclaire is a cesspool of dark magic," he growls.

Mab huffs. "Tell me about it."

I jerk my head toward her. "You can hear him?"

She lifts a shoulder, a pleased smile quirking her lips. "Cats love me."

The declaration is so reminiscent of Jasper that a fist squeezes my heart. Tears burn my throat, and I can almost hear my father's voice telling me to keep control. But I've already lost it. The proof is all around me in the form of four icy walls. I yielded the upper hand to Zaphira by hiding in the Hallows and doing nothing. Now she's got Jasper, and I'm powerless to help him.

Mab cocks her head to the side, her gaze on Bert and Mert. After a second, her eyes warm. "Well, of course they are, Bertram. Anyone with eyes could have told you that."

In my pocket, Bert sticks his chin in the air and releases a squeak that sounds suspiciously like *'hmph'*."

Mab chuckles. Then she looks at me, her expression abruptly razor-focused. "How serious are you about getting out of this vow?"

My heart skips a beat. "Very. But I thought you said you can't break it."

"True. *I* can't." She shoots me a mysterious little smile. "Words matter, elf." As I suck in a breath at having my line to Jasper parroted back to me, she claps her hands together, fumbles her wand, and sticks it into her bun. "Right," she says, rolling up her sleeves. "Let's get cracking. We've got twenty-four hours until the solstice—"

"What?" I gasp, panic rising.

Mab waves it off. “Don’t worry, I’m excellent under pressure. Now, I have an idea for how to fix this, but it’s just a theory.” Her deep blue eyes bore into mine as her tone grows grave. “I need you to understand that it might not work. And if it doesn’t, you could break your vow and die. Are you prepared to take that risk?”

At my feet, Sulien stiffens. When I look down, his golden eyes brim with worry.

Risk. It’s what I’ve tried to avoid. From the moment I learned of the geas, I’ve sought to keep Jasper from harm.

But no, it started before that, when I kept my betrothal from him in Paris. I told myself I was waiting for the right moment to tell him—that I didn’t want to risk ruining what we had—but, really, I was a coward. And I hurt him. Despite everything, he took me back. My mischievous, loving, wonderful pixie gave me another chance. Can I risk my life to give us a chance for a real future together?

I meet Mab’s gaze. “Tell me what I need to do.”

She grins. “How much do you know about glass slippers?”

CHAPTER 17

JASPER

The day of the wedding dawns cold as fuck. No surprise, considering Fourneclaire is a giant refrigerator.

As the hours tick by, servants come and go, curling and primping and preparing Liriel and her attendants for the ceremony. The mood is somber, and if I never see another snowflake again it'll be too soon.

"Is your mother aware that most people actively dislike winter?" I ask Liriel as I sprawl on the sofa in her bedroom. I lie on my back with my legs draped over the rolled arm. My newly healed wing droops toward the plush carpet I've grown tired of staring at over the past three days. I stare at the ceiling now as I bounce one leg up and down. A plaster medallion in the shape of a snowflake surrounds the crystal chandelier. *Ice* crystals. Zaphira's decor is woefully predictable. I bounce my leg harder and give the medallion the middle finger.

Liriel makes a low, pained sound. When I turn my head, I find her seated at her vanity with her elbows on the surface and her head in her hands. As she feels the weight of my regard, she lifts her head and meets my gaze in the mirror. Her pale hair is piled high in an intricate arrangement that defies gravity. Her silk robe is the same snowy shade as her hair. Servants did her makeup as we lunched. She looks beautiful—and utterly devastated.

"Hey," I say, swinging my legs off the sofa's arm and standing up. I flick my wings as I move to her side and rest a hand on her silk-covered shoulder. Neve curls at her feet, the fox's posture defeated.

I open my mouth to ask what's wrong, but then I snap it shut. We both know what's wrong.

Liriel offers me a sad smile in the mirror. "I don't think my mother is interested in what other people like or dislike."

My gut clenches. For the past three days, I've done my best to put on a brave face. I've tapped every ounce of pixie charm I possess even as I've searched for a way to get to Vale. But I haven't been able to charm my way more than a dozen steps past Liriel's bedroom. In the beginning, the elven guards were posted at the end of the corridor. The second time I attempted to sneak past them, they moved to right outside the bedroom door—but not before they made me regret trying to evade their notice.

"Nice try with the glamour, pixie," the bigger one growled as he buried a fist in my gut. *"But your tricks won't work here."*

Gasping for air, I jerked out of the second guard's reach. *"Watch it, dickhead, this is cashmere."* As the first guard seized my elbow and hauled me toward the bedroom, I dragged my feet. *"You always sucker punch your prisoners, tough guy?"*

He thrust me away from him and delivered a brutal, open-handed slap that sent me reeling into the second guard. As I swallowed blood, the first guard shoved me toward the bedroom. *"Not always,"* he said with a cruel laugh. *"Sometimes, we slap them."*

Ceri scolded me afterward, but her hands shook as she healed the cut on my lip. *"You have to be careful, Jasper. They'll kill you if you push them too far."*

Movement in the mirror pulls me from my memories. Liriel reaches a hand up and wraps her slim fingers around mine. "We're out of time," she whispers, her blue eyes flicking to the window reflected behind us. Through the ice-coated bars, snowflakes swirl in the night sky.

My throat goes dry as I look at the small clock on Liriel's nightstand. One hour until midnight. And one hour until I watch Vale marry someone else. Or watch him die trying to break his vow.

"I'll think of something," I say, meeting Liriel's gaze.

"Will you, really?" a deep, feminine voice drawls through the door. It opens, and two Summer Court warriors with snowflake badges on their chests enter, followed by a tall, regal woman with black hair and skin like snow. She pauses just inside the threshold, a vicious smile curving her red lips as she pins me with a glacial look. "Typical pixie," she adds softly, "a lot of big talk and not much else. No wonder Abelin is infatuated with you." She rakes a dismissive gaze down my body, lingering on my wings. "He always did like useless, pretty things."

Anger flares, and I open my mouth with a demand to see Vale on my lips. My words die as Liriel gives my hand a warning squeeze that grinds my bones together.

Zaphira smiles and tilts her head to the side, setting the icy blue diamonds in her ears swinging. "Do you want to see him? Don't worry, you'll have a front-row view when he says his vows."

I clench my jaw as I hold her stare.

She raises her voice. "Ceridwen! We're all waiting!" A second later, Ceri rushes through the door with a billowing white gown in her arms. Sherlock swoops into the room behind her and settles on the back of a chair with snowflakes embroidered on the cushion.

"'Ello," he squawks, bobbing his head in Zaphira's direction.

She gives him an irritated look.

"Apologies for my tardiness, Your Majesty," Ceri says, her voice breathless as she dips a curtsy. She wobbles under the enormous dress before righting herself. "We were looking for the shoes."

Zaphira's eyes flash. "Did you find them?"

"Yes, ma'am." Ceri shifts the dress in her arms, revealing a pair of women's high heels pinched between her fingers. Dainty and transparent, the shoes gleam like glass.

"Take care with them."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Zaphira motions Ceri toward Liriel. "Dress the princess quickly. We're running short on time." She turns to the guards. "And someone fetch the pixie's clothes." The temperature drops as Zaphira smiles at me. "We don't want our guest to miss the festivities."

Over the next half hour, servants move in and out of Liriel's bedroom like the tide coming and going. I change into a pair of white silk knee breeches and a heavy white jacket embroidered with silver snowflakes. Ceri and several other elven women help Liriel into her wedding finery under the icy supervision of Zaphira and the guards. When Liriel makes a sound of protest as the women begin to remove her robe, Zaphira rolls her eyes.

"Oh, don't be such a prude, Liriel."

Liriel glances at the guards. "I'm not a prude, Mother. I just—"

"Get on with it," Zaphira orders the women. Several cast Liriel apologetic looks as they pull the

princess's robe from her shoulders, exposing her white lingerie.

"Bitch," I mutter, rage searing my chest as I glare at Zaphira.

She turns. As she lifts a hand, my heart speeds up. I brace for pain, but she flicks her wrist in Ceri's direction. A long, thin icicle streaks toward the lady-in-waiting, who gasps and jerks out of its path at the last second. The icicle embeds itself in the wall, its tapered length shivering.

I swallow hard as my heart thumps painfully.

"Did you have something to say, pixie?" Zaphira asks softly.

"No." As Liriel shoots me a pleading look, I dip my head and grind out, "Your Majesty."

After a few more minutes, Liriel is ready at last. Her white gown is adorned with silver snowflakes. Flurries dance around her billowing skirt. A crown of ice crystals glitters in her hair. Ceri stands to the side, her hands clasped in front of her and a look of such intense longing on her face that I have to bite back a sob.

Or maybe a scream. Because this is all *wrong*. My matchmaking magic pings in a thousand frazzled directions, my gift urging me to intervene as the guards move to the door. But I bite my tongue against the need to speak up. I have zero doubt Zaphira is unhinged enough to seriously hurt, if not outright kill, Ceri if I say anything else.

"Let's go," Zaphira says, impatience in her tone. When Neve starts toward the door, Zaphira makes a negative sound. "No. Familiars stay behind."

Ceri and Liriel exchange a tense look. After a moment's hesitation, Liriel bends and strokes the fox's head. "I'll be back later."

Neve rubs snowy whiskers along Liriel's hand before walking to Sherlock and sitting by his chair.

"Murder!" the parrot shrieks.

Zaphira turns to Ceridwen. "I told you to teach your bird some manners."

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I'll speak to him."

Liriel and her attendants move toward the door.

"After you, pixie," the guard who slapped me says at my shoulder. His eyes are a dull brown. A thick scar bisects his cheek.

My fingers itch, hexing dust flowing down my arm to my hand.

"Try it," he taunts softly. "Give me an excuse."

I hold his stare, and I let all the anger, fear, and frustration of the past three days coalesce into resolve. It must show in my eyes, because the guard's sneer falters.

"Soon," I promise, brushing past him and stepping into the wide corridor. Liriel and her attendants move toward a grand staircase. Ceri carries Liriel's train. I move to her side and lift a handful of gauzy material.

"Oh," I say, surprise flitting through me when the train melts against my skin only to immediately reform. "It's snow."

Tears brim in Ceri's green eyes before she blinks them away.

I move my hand along the edge of the train and grip her fingers.

"Someone will see," she whispers, fear in her voice.

"No, they won't." I reach over and flip more lacy snowflakes over our joined hands. "There's so much magical snow on this dress you could ski down it."

Ceri gives a watery laugh before quickly biting her lip.

"Steady," I tell her as we reach the stairs. "This isn't over until that clock chimes midnight. We're not giving up."

She nods, and as we descend the stairs I try to follow my own advice.

TEN MINUTES LATER, ANXIETY AND ANTICIPATION ARE A POTENT MIX IN MY CHEST AS WE ENTER THE ballroom where the ceremony will take place.

We pause just inside the huge double doors, guards flanking us. A string quartet sends classical music floating into the soaring space, which is dazzling but austere in silver and white with touches of pale blue. Icicles cling to the ceiling, their spiky points glittering like diamonds. Snowflakes drift through the air and disappear before they touch the floor. An ancient-looking clock hangs high on the wall, its long hands showing ten minutes until midnight. Elves from both the Summer and Winter Courts gather on either side of a long, silvery runner. Neither group looks pleased to see each other.

But the most displeased-looking elf in the room is Vale.

Vale.

My knees loosen, and I almost trip and fall headfirst into Liriel's train. Ceri tightens her grip on my hand, keeping me upright.

"Thanks," I say breathlessly, my heart threatening to pound from my chest and sprint to the dais where the love of my life stares at me with intense golden eyes. For a moment, the ballroom falls away, and it's just us. I drink him in greedily, letting my gaze roam from his mahogany hair and firm, stubbled jaw to his broad chest and strong legs planted on the snow-covered dais. Relief pounds through me at the sight of Sulien sitting at his side. Every few seconds, the cat rubs his whiskers along Vale's thigh.

I can hardly blame him. Vale has never been more radiant. His golden jacket hugs his muscular shoulders. Tight-fitting breeches make my mouth water. Black boots rise to his knees. A crown sprinkled with yellow gemstones nestles among his waves, which are tucked behind his pointed ears. As we stare at each other across the length of the ballroom, his hands twitch at his sides. He looks me over, his gaze returning again and again to my wing.

He worries I'm still hurt, I realize, tears burning my throat. Ahead of me, Liriel sinks into a low curtsy. As the other elves do the same, an ear-splitting roar rips through the ballroom. A second later, a griffin stalks from somewhere and climbs onto the dais. A tall, powerful-looking elf wearing an ornate crown follows in the beast's wake. As the elf steps beside Vale and faces the crowd, every knee in the room hits the floor. The musicians pause their music.

The temperature plunges.

Vale's jaw tightens.

Zaphira sweeps from behind me, moves past Liriel, and glides to the dais. She pauses before King Nylian and dips a shallow curtsy. "Husband."

The king inclines his head. "Wife." He sweeps a hand to the side, and Zaphira mounts the dais and settles on a small throne positioned next to a larger one.

King Nylian rests a hand on the griffin's head. Vale stands stiffly at his father's side. Seeing them together, it's impossible to mistake them for anything but father and son. Nylian's hair is longer, his build smaller, but his handsome features are so similar to Vale's it's almost like seeing double—or perhaps it would be if not for the king's cold expression.

My nape prickles as Nylian gazes at the crowd—because he doesn't appear to actually *see* anything. His stare is curiously blank, his expression almost…frozen.

"I bid you welcome!" he says suddenly, his voice booming through the ballroom. He lifts his hand from the griffin's head and motions to the crowd. "Please, rise."

Every elf in the ballroom straightens in one smooth, coordinated movement.

"Our people could never pull that off," Mab murmurs next to me.

I snort. "I know, right?" I jerk my head to the side so hard my neck twinges. "Ow! Fuck."

"Keep your voice down," my aunt says, her gaze on the dais. She furrows her brow. "I thought you weren't supposed to wear white to weddings." On the dais, King Nylian launches into a solemn-sounding speech about maintaining peace among the elven courts.

"Jasper?" Ceri murmurs on my other side. When I look at her, she's staring at Mab with a troubled expression. "Do you know him?"

Him? I swing back to my aunt, who winks at me as her glamour flickers, giving me a glimpse of a nondescript male with muddy brown eyes.

I lean into her and whisper in her ear. "Are you wearing Tower du Sang's glamour?"

"Oh, this old thing?" Mab looks down at herself with a distracted air. "I must have bought it off him."

"Wait, when did you meet Tower?"

"Who?"

I take a deep breath. "*Tower du Sang*. The leader of the vamp— You know what, never mind. What are you doing here?"

Mab pulls a silver wand from behind her ear. "Fairy godmother shit." She flicks the wand over me. Nothing happens.

"Aunt Mab, that wand is plastic."

"Is it?" She peers at the star on the end. "Damn." She shoves it at me.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I hiss, taking it.

"I don't know, put it in your pocket."

"In these breeches?" I mutter, stuffing the wand as deep as I can get it and flipping my coat over it.

Mab studies me, one manicured finger tapping against her lips. "Here, let's try this." She swipes a hand through the air and tosses a handful of hot pink pixie dust over me. Instantly, I stagger under the weight of an enormous wedding gown.

Liriel's wedding gown. I reach up and feel the ice-crystal crown on my head. I'm inches taller, my feet tucked into the glass slippers under my skirt of snowflakes. My glamour is seamless.

Ceri's jaw drops.

Mab flings another handful of dust at Liriel, whose back stiffens as she transforms into me.

For a moment, disorientation sweeps me as I stare at myself from behind, taking in my short, platinum hair and fluttering wings. Then Rufus steps beside me and sweeps his gaze down Me-But-Not-Me.

"Your ass looks halfway decent in those breeches."

"Fuck you," I murmur, "my ass looks stunning." I look at my aunt's steward and get a glimpse of his bushy red beard hidden under the glamour of an elven female. "How did you get past the guards?"

His teeth flash white against his bright red lipstick. "Trade secret." He nudges me in front of him. "Go marry your man before these elves figure us out."

As soon as he says it, King Nylian's voice soars through the ballroom. "…and we maintain this peace through the bond of marriage." No one has moved since Mab and Rufus showed up.

"Oy!" Rufus says, giving me another nudge. "Switch places with the princess."

Heart racing, I lift my gown and move forward as Liriel turns—and I experience the mind-fuck of seeing my own eyes go wide as Liriel realizes we've traded appearances.

Ceri beckons to Liriel, and I watch as understanding lights my eyes.

"It's always so sweet when they finally get it," Mab says beside me.

Hope and confusion swirl through me as I turn to my aunt. "I thought you said you couldn't break Vale's vow."

She reaches up and pats my cheek. "I'm not going to break it, honey. *You* are."

Liriel goes to Ceri as Rufus melts into the crowd.

Before I can take another step, a rattling sound fills my ears, followed by a hiss that makes me turn just as a basilisk slips between the ballroom's double doors. Fangs bared, it lunges for me.

I stumble backward, losing one of my slippers in the process.

Mab steps in front of me and flings a cloud of pixie dust into the basilisk's gaping mouth. The serpent snaps its jaws shut and recoils as red blisters spread down its body. Eyes rolling in obvious agony, it retreats through the doors.

Mab spins back around and waves me toward the dais with a frantic whisper. "It's five minutes to midnight. Go!"

Abruptly, music swells. Around me, the guards rouse as if waking from a daydream. In the crowd, a few elves sway on their feet. King Nylian goes to his throne and sits. His griffin tosses its head and follows the king. A tall, somber-looking elf dressed in bright yellow robes steps beside Vale and opens a book.

"Go *on*," Mab says, nudging me forward.

"My shoe," I protest, stumbling.

"Forget it. Your prince is waiting."

I lift my head and meet Vale's gaze as every set of eyes in the ballroom lands on me. But I barely notice. Memories swirl—warm, spring days in Paris and a summer prince smiling at me in the middle of a cobblestone street as I smooth my hair.

I'm better than most at seeing under glamour.

In my memory, honey-colored eyes smile, delight swimming in their depths. *Is that so?*

The same eyes smile at me now. I don't know if Vale can see under my glamour, but it doesn't matter.

He knows.

He knows it's me.

I'm coming, I tell him silently as I hold his gaze and move down the aisle. I walk the gauntlet of elves in my Liriel glamour, each step carrying me closer to Vale. *I'm coming, my prince.*

I'm not going to lose you.

CHAPTER 18

VALE

Hope and fear war within me as Jasper walks down the aisle. I don't need his gift to peer under his glamour. I'd know my pixie anywhere.

But I have to count on Mab knowing what she's doing. Because if this plan doesn't work, I'll die and leave Jasper at Zaphira's mercy.

Under my heavy court clothes, sweat trickles down my spine. Around me, no one seems to notice anything amiss. Elves from both courts follow Jasper's progress. From the looks on their faces, they see what they're supposed to see: Liriel in a stunning, winter-themed wedding gown that represents her court.

At the bottom of the dais, Liriel's uncle, King Elendor of the Winter Court, observes the bridal procession with a cool, detached expression. His warriors flank him, their faces just as dispassionate. Many of the higher-ranking elves have their familiars with them. At the edge of the crowd, Elendor's silvery reindeer noses the lower tiers of the towering wedding cake.

Sulien purrs softly through our bond as he sits at my side, a silent sentinel. Izig stands among the crowd. Thank fuck he's alright. Acrid bitterness underscores my relief at seeing him.

He'll suffer, too, if this doesn't work. Zaphira won't leave any stone unturned in her quest to punish me and the people I love.

The music swells. Heads turn slowly, all eyes on the bride.

Beside me, the officiant makes a pleased, humming sound. "Lovely gown." He sways toward me, his elbow brushing mine. "You're a lucky man, Your Highness."

"Thank you," I say under my breath. *Let's hope my luck doesn't run out.*

At the far end of the ballroom, Ceri stands next to Liriel glamoured to appear as Jasper. Their expressions are tense as Jasper lifts Ceri's hand and holds it close to his heart. His knuckles turn white as they stare into each other's eyes.

Stop it, I will silently. At the edge of my vision, Zaphira still sits on her throne. My father is a stoic presence beside her, his long fingers stroking absently through Olios's mane.

At last, Ceri and Jasper meet my gaze. When I give a subtle nod, they part and trail up the aisle behind Liriel, straightening her long, icy train.

Tension tightens my shoulders as Liriel nears the dais. She wobbles suddenly, and I catch a glimpse of bare toes peeking from under her gown's embroidered trim. She's missing a glass slipper. As she begins to unevenly ascend the stairs, I reach for her hand.

"Allow me, Princess," I offer.

She blushes and takes my outstretched fingers, letting me help her onto the dais. Her gown's

snowy train bundles around our feet, sending a chill sweeping through me. Nerves trill alarms in my brain. My magic gathers, desperate to burst from me and blast my enemies to ash. Ceri flits around Liriel, smoothing wrinkles from the train. Jasper stands frozen at the bottom of the dais, watching us with a desperate look on his face.

The ancient clock that counts down the solstice begins to chime. Three minutes until midnight. Ceri curtsies and steps back. Jasper casts anxious looks at her, his fingers curling into fists at his sides. Ceri descends the dais and stands next to Jasper. After a second, she takes Jasper's hand.

My stomach churns as Liriel clutches my fingers more tightly.

Zaphira rises from her throne, her glittering eyes locked on Ceri and Jasper. She drops her gaze to their joined hands. "What are you doing?" she hisses, eyes narrowing.

Liriel stares into my eyes and gives me a slow, sly smile.

The clock chimes again. Two minutes until midnight.

"Stepmother," I call, drawing her attention back to me. Summoning the same swagger I use before every fight, I urge bass into my voice. "Let's carry on, shall we?"

Zaphira's eyes narrow further as she swings her head back to Ceri and Jasper. She rounds Liriel and begins to descend the dais toward the couple.

Shocked-sounding gasps rise from the contingent of Winter Court elves. King Elendor frowns as he watches Zaphira.

On his throne, my father continues stroking Olios's shaggy head.

The ballroom's double doors fly open and bang loudly against the walls. Icicles crack loose from the ceiling and rain down onto the floor, smashing into chunks that skid across the slick marble.

Bert and an army of mice rush in, scampering across the floor and climbing up the nearest chairs. Shocked screams echo off the chilly walls. Hundreds of hummingbirds follow the mice, diving toward the attendees as the room descends into chaos. Zaphira's guards rush in after them, stabbing and swiping at the tiny horde. Around the ballroom, elven familiars bark, roar, and screech as they join the fracas.

Zaphira screams and thrusts her hands out, shooting icicles across the room toward the oncoming army. Elves dive out of the way of her deadly attack.

"Mother!" Liriel shouts, her voice panicked. "It's almost midnight!"

Zaphira whirls around and stalks back up the dais, pointing a finger at the officiant. "Do your duty. Quickly!"

My father sits on his throne, his features emotionless as he gazes over the melee. If he's surprised or ruffled by the mayhem, he doesn't show it. A hummingbird flits past his face, but he pays it no mind.

Zaphira swats at two blackbirds as they dive out of the air and narrowly miss her head.

Liriel takes my hands and turns her wide blue eyes to the officiant. "Please," she urges, her voice tense. "We need to say our vows."

He clears his throat, his eyes flicking toward Zaphira as a dozen hummingbirds drop out of the sky to peck at her eyes. She roars and waves her hands around, ducking and diving to avoid their onslaught.

I smile, but my amusement vanishes as the clock chimes once more.

Sixty seconds.

At the foot of the dais, Jasper and Ceri clutch at each other. Tears stream down Ceri's face as she whispers in Jasper's ear. He squeezes his eyes shut and lets out a sob.

I turn to the officiant. "I order you to perform this ceremony. Now."

"Once upon a time," the officiant begins. "Winter was—"

"Get the fuck on with it!" Zaphira screams. "Just get to the vows!"

The hair on my nape lifts. *Tick, tock, tick, tock.* The clock's second hand rounds the bend toward midnight.

Thirty seconds.

The officiant snaps his book shut. "Prince Abelin Vale of the Summer Court, do you take Liriel Evanian of the Winter Court to be your most beloved of mates? Do you agree to cherish and hold her in winter's light?"

"I do," I reply, my gaze locked with Liriel's. A mischievous glint shines in her eyes. I resist the smile that tugs at my lips.

Liriel's face flickers, hints of a deeper, more brilliant blue shining through her irises. Spiky blond hair is visible and gone in a flash.

"Vail, wait!" Sully shouts in our bond.

Izig darts forward with a glass slipper in his hands. He sets it carefully at my feet, then moves back. With a shaking hand, he removes his bowler hat and holds it over his heart. "It has to be perfect," he whispers.

The glamour. Of course Mab briefed him on the plan. Leave it to Izig to always remember the details.

"Thank you," I murmur to my longtime friend. "For everything." If these are my last moments with my friends, I want them to know exactly what they mean to me.

Sulien is a dark shadow by my side as I drop to one knee, take the slipper, and lift the hem of Liriel's gown.

At the bottom of the dais, Jasper cups Ceri's face. "Marry me?" he asks under his breath.

Ceri's eyes brighten, and she nods, pressing both hands over his. "Of course," she whispers.

Zaphira slaps a hummingbird out of the air and rounds on me. "What the fuck is going on here?"

The clock chimes ten seconds until midnight.

I slide Liriel's foot easily into the slipper. Rising, I take her hands.

Chime. Five seconds.

Zaphira grabs the officiant by the collar of his robes and shakes him. "Faster, you fool!"

Chime. Four seconds.

The officiant turns wide eyes on Liriel. "And do you, Liriel Evanian, take Abelin Vale to be your most beloved of mates? Do you agree to cherish and hold him in the sun's rays? Say you will, please." He glances nervously at Zaphira as she grips his collar.

Chime. Two seconds.

At the foot of the dais, Jasper and Ceri gaze at each other, their lips moving as they mouth the same vows.

Chime. One second.

Liriel smiles, her eyes bright with love. "I do." Her voice rings out over the chaos.

Midnight.

Wrapping an arm around Liriel, I pull her close and slant my mouth over hers. As twelve resonant gongs announce the solstice, I palm Liriel's nape and deepen the kiss.

Magic. It shimmers in the air.

Around us, everyone stills.

Liriel's glamour slips away.

Now, it's Jasper's neck under my palm. Jasper's lips on mine. Jasper's love that wraps around

me like the warmest ray of sunshine. It melts the ice at our feet, the last of the wedding gown's chilly train pooling on the stones beneath us. As the final clock chime fades, Jasper and I ease apart and smile at each other.

"What is the meaning of this?" King Elendor demands. Winter Court elves crowd around him, anger and confusion in their eyes. Behind them, Elendor's reindeer works its big jaws around a mouthful of wedding cake.

A desperate need to laugh and cry at the same time rises in my throat. I clutch Jasper's hand as we look at the clock.

The minute hand ticks to 12:01.

A choked sob bursts from Ceri's throat. Where she held Jasper, Liriel now stands, beaming at the woman she just married. The flapping of wings fills the air, and Sherlock soars through the ballroom and alights on Ceri's shoulder. Neve scampers after him, her white tail wagging as she runs circles around Ceri and Liriel.

"'Ello!" the parrot chirps, leaning his head toward Liriel and stroking his bright plumage over her cheek.

Relief floods me, followed by joy as Jasper leaps into my arms and buries his face in my neck.

"It worked!" a bubbly voice shouts from the back of the room.

My father sits on his throne, his eyes glassy as he continues petting Olios. A few elves dodge hummingbirds that still flit through the air. Mab strides up the long runner, her hands clasped together and a triumphant smile on her face.

I kiss Jasper's temple as I chuckle into his ear. "Part *deux* of the plan, *mon amour*."

Zaphira rounds on Mab, her face a mask of fury. "You! No one invited you, pixie." Zaphira looks around, something frantic in her eyes. "Guards! How did she get in?"

Mab stops at the bottom of the dais and examines her nails. "Bitch, please." She lifts her gaze and gives Zaphira a withering look. "You have your head so far up your ass, you never saw me coming."

"This will never work," Zaphira seethes. "This pixie trickery. Abelin swore an *unbreakable* vow to the Winter Court!"

Mab's eyes go uncharacteristically hard. "Your daughter took a vow, as well." She tips her head to the side. "How interesting that a mother would gamble with her child's life to gain political power. Or maybe it was just raw power you wanted."

Behind Mab, movement draws my attention.

Ybris sidewinds up the aisle, venom dripping from his fangs.

I jerk forward, but Jasper grabs my wrist.

"Patience, love," he says, his blue eyes trained on the basilisk. He reaches down and pulls a plastic wand from his pocket. Smiling, he looks at the star on the end. "I'm better than most at seeing under glamour."

Mab stands steady, a triumphant smile on her face. Her wings gleam golden in the frosty air.

Zaphira draws herself up. "What would you know of power, pixie?"

"More than you, apparently," Mab says. Her eyes glint like sapphires. "If you're going to wield it, sorceress, you should understand the consequences."

Ybris rears behind Mab and stretches his jaws wide.

Jasper leaps off the dais, his wings flapping. The wand shimmers and reforms into a glittering black sword. He darts through the air and swings it, slicing the basilisk's head off in a single slash.

Ybris's body whips around, spraying blood. Screams echo off the ice-encrusted ceiling. King Elendor's guards surround him, a dozen ice-blue daggers appearing in their fists.

"No!" Zaphira cries, rushing forward. Her features shift and shimmer then fall away, revealing a woman with long red hair wearing a tight-fitting black gown.

On his throne, my father makes a choking sound.

I rush to him and grip his shoulder. "Father!"

Golden eyes flicker as he looks up at me, recognition dawning. "Abelin? What—? What's…?" His voice trails off as he takes in the writhing basilisk, Queen Mab, and the ballroom full of shocked-looking elves. King Elendor shoves his guards aside, a furious look on his face.

The room stills. All eyes go to Zaphira.

She lets out a shaky laugh. "This is all a misunderstanding."

My relief at not dying swirls and builds into a raging tempest of fury at what she took from me. I could have lost everything tonight if the plan hadn't worked. I stride from the dais as Mab takes the sword from Jasper. When I reach her, she flips it and offers it to me hilt-first.

"Prince Vale," she murmurs, inclining her head.

"Queen Mab," I say, returning the gesture. Respect shimmers between us as I take the sword.

Jasper brushes my arm. "Your father looks a little confused. Let me help him." He rounds me and ascends the dais. My heart swells when he drops to one knee next to my father's throne and speaks to him in a low voice. I'd love nothing more than to watch them together.

But I have a sorceress to attend to.

Squaring my shoulders, I face Zaphira.

She backs up and throws both palms in the air. "Prince Abelin, this has all been a terrible mistake."

I put the sword's point under her chin, stilling her progress. "It's Vale," I say softly. "And I agree, Melusine, you made a terrible, deadly mistake when you killed the rightful princess of the Winter Court."

Around the ballroom, elves gasp. Indignant shouts rise from King Elendor and his guards. Elendor pushes through a wall of blue-clad warriors and draws a glittering dagger from his belt.

The sorceress Melusine's face contorts in obvious fury. "Zaphira was weak! My magic was always stronger!" She flicks her gaze to King Elendor. "Your brother was a fool. It should have been me on the throne!"

Liriel moves forward, Ceri's hand in hers as she stares at Melusine. "You killed my mother?" she rasps, her face pale.

"Yes," I say, holding the sword steady even as I long to plunge it into the sorceress's throat. "Melusine lusted for power. She knew your father would never choose a commoner as a mate, so she waited until your parents were wed. Then she infiltrated your mother's inner circle and took her place."

A fresh chorus of outraged shouts rises from the elves of the Winter Court.

I raise my voice as I glare at Melusine and relay the dark history Mab shared with me in the ice cell. "But that wasn't enough for you, was it? Because your magic feeds on sorrow. So you killed Liriel's father, and then you moved onto mine. You spelled him and his guards." A growl rumbles in my chest. "All these centuries, you took him from me. You would have taken my mate, too."

"A pixie?" Melusine mocks, hatred burning in her eyes. "A weak mate for a weak prince!"

"That's where you're wrong," I say, love for Jasper filling my chest. Bright joy spills into my magic, which flares from my fingertips and casts golden rays over the ballroom. The temperature rises, and ice begins to drip from the ceiling. Water pools on the marble as the man I love guides my father down the dais.

I hear the triumph in my voice as I smile at Melusine. "Jasper is a stronger prince than I'll ever be."

The sorceress's eyes flick to Jasper and my father. Her breathing grows uneven as fear replaces her anger.

I lower the sword and turn to King Elendor. "She killed your brother and sister-in-law, Your Majesty. I deliver her into your hands. Do with her as you see fit."

Elendor's pale blue eyes go hard. He gestures to his warriors, who spring forward and surround Melusine. "In the Winter Court, we have interesting ways of making examples of traitors." Elendor looks at me. "She won't live to see the morning."

Melusine pales. A whimper escapes her lips.

"One last thing," Jasper says, releasing my father and moving to my side. He pins Melusine with a look hard enough to cut diamonds. "Release Prince Vale from your geas or I'll kill you myself." He leans forward, the tips of his wings going black as night. "And I'll make it hurt."

Melusine draws a shuddering breath. She flicks a hand toward me. "It's done."

"Good," Jasper says. "Fuck you."

"Take her," King Elendor orders. Melusine cries out as the guards grip her arms. Frost spreads rapidly over her skin, coating her limbs and encasing her body in a block of ice. Her terror-filled eyes flick back and forth as the warriors lift her and carry her from the ballroom.

Pain shoots through my skull, the zing of agony doubling me over. The pixie sword in my hand vanishes, leaving me grasping at air.

"Vale!" Jasper's voice is strained as he grips my arm. When I straighten, his worried blue eyes fill my vision. Over his shoulder, his gossamer wings shimmer with a hundred different colors.

And, suddenly, I see him. All of him. Each minute with him. Every glittering, golden moment from Paris floods my head.

"Jasper," I whisper, grasping his shoulders.

His eyes shine with tears. "Vale."

I stare into my husband's brilliant blue eyes as I shake off the last of the geas's effects. Then I rest my forehead against his, sharing his breath as he holds me upright. The urge to sweep him into my arms and stride from the ballroom is so powerful I can almost taste it.

Except there's one last thing.

Drawing a deep breath, I set Jasper away from me and turn toward the ballroom's double doors. Zaphira's—*Melusine's*—personal guard stands there, their expressions shell-shocked as I run my gaze over them, searching for one particular face.

There.

That fucking face.

I eat up the distance between us in a dozen strides. As I stop before the head guard, he turns the color of fresh snow. Dull brown eyes fill with fear. The scar on his cheek is a livid pink against his wan complexion.

"I told you," I murmur, "I never forget a face."

"Prince Abelin…" he starts. But he never gets the chance to finish as I call the sun and let Her rays blast from my fingertips. I roar as white-hot sunlight slams into the guards, cracking their skin and lighting their skulls from the inside out. They fall to the ground, writhing in pain. With a last, violent shove of power, I explode their bodies into ash.

For a moment, no one in the ballroom moves. Dark embers eddy through the air, dancing on the warm breeze of my magic. When I turn, elves from both the Summer and Winter Courts bow their

heads. At the foot of the dais, Jasper beams at me and holds out his hand.

I go to him, my boots splashing in the puddles formed by a thousand melted icicles. As I slip my hand into his, Mab comes to my side and gives my shoulder an affectionate pat.

"Well done, honey."

My father looks between me and the diminutive pixie queen. For the first time in hundreds of years, his eyes are clear of frost. As Melusine's spell lifts, anger brews in the golden depths. "Zaphira…" He squeezes his hand into a fist at his side.

Mab's expression is somber but kind as she nods. "Melusine was clever, King Nylian, and she grew bolder and more powerful as she fed off the misery she caused. She anchored her glamour in her familiar. You shouldn't blame yourself for not seeing it."

My father closes his eyes on a long blink. When he opens them and looks at me, they burn with pain. "I don't understand. How does Abelin live? I was there when he and Liriel swore an unbreakable vow."

"You stood witness," Mab says. "But so did Melusine. As you know, every elven vow requires witnesses to be enforceable. Melusine passed herself off as Zaphira for so long, she started to believe it. And beliefs can be powerful. But at the end of the day, she was an imposter." Mab shrugs. "I had a feeling the magic didn't take as well as it should have. There were weak spots. Your son and Liriel found them."

I meet Liriel's gaze. She stands hand in hand with Ceri, a tremulous smile on her beautiful face. I smile back, something raw and tender arcing between us.

Mab beams at the women, then bumps my shoulder with hers. "Love, *mon prince*. Everyone dismisses it."

Not me, I think. *Never again.*

Jasper looks at his aunt. "How did you know Zaphira was an imposter?"

Mab smiles as a hummingbird flits to her and perches on her finger. "I didn't until recently," she says, stroking the tiny creature's cheek. "But a little bird told me." She looks at me once more. "You'll be king one day. Never underestimate small, pretty things."

I swallow the lump in my throat as I slip an arm around Jasper's waist. "I won't," I promise.

My father looks at me with tears shimmering in his golden eyes. "I'm proud of you, son. You saw what I couldn't."

"And what you refused to see," Mab adds gently.

Father nods as he looks at the pixie queen with newfound respect in his gaze. "Yes. I've been wilfully blind."

Jasper takes her hand. "Thank you for everything, Aunt Mab."

Mab winks. "No worries. Nice job with the sword."

"Thanks. I liked it. Heavy, though."

"Right?"

"Your glamour on that wand was impeccable. I almost didn't catch it."

Mab grins. "Well, you and I are better than most at seeing through disguises. Family trait and all."

Jasper shoots me a smug look. "True."

Mab reaches up and tucks a lock of platinum hair behind his ear. "You'll be as good as me one day. Hopefully in time for you to take the reins."

Jasper stiffens. "The reins?"

She smooths her own hair back, poking pale strands into a sequined hair clip. "Yeah, you know, since you're my heir."

Jasper stares at his aunt, a look of shock on his gorgeous face.

Joy and amusement mingle in my chest as I wrap an arm around his shoulders. “You’ve finally rendered him speechless,” I tell Mab.

“Aunt Mab,” Jasper says carefully. “You didn’t have me match all the syndicate lords just to maneuver me into meeting Vale, did you?”

Mab shoots him an exasperated look. “What? You didn’t really think I was going to let my only nephew go without his fated mate, did you?” She mutters to herself. “Puck’s jock strap, boys are so dense sometimes.”

My father looks at Jasper, growing admiration in his eyes. “You’re the grandson of King Cirro.”

Jasper gives my father a wary look. “That’s right.”

“The finest matchmaker to ever live,” Father says, something like awe in his voice.

“Until now,” Mab says softly. When Jasper’s breath hitches, she gives him a tender, affectionate smile. “Your magic has always been strong. But now you understand that true love is the most powerful magic. And it’s worth fighting for.”

Jasper nods, pink touching his cheekbones.

Mab turns to my father. “Perhaps, Your Majesty, the future pixie king is a fitting match for your son, after all?”

“Yes,” my father rasps.

I cup Jasper’s jaw as I run my other hand up his chest and rest it over his heart. “A perfect match,” I agree, guiding his lips to mine. “Absolutely perfect.”

EPILOGUE

JASPER

Summer

Paris in summer. Has there ever been anything better?

"Baby, will you hurry up?"

I dab gloss on my lips and smile at myself in the mirror as Vale's deep, exasperated voice drifts from his bedroom. *Our* bedroom. In the six months since we defeated Melusine, we've been busy traveling back and forth between our respective courts. The brownstone in Villette is a perfect base for both of us.

"I'm wrapping your wedding present!" I yell back, turning sideways and checking my reflection. "Don't you want your present?" I twist in the other direction and prop one French-manicured hand on my hip. *Damn, even better than I imagined.* Of course, the lighting is perfect. I wink at myself in the mirror. There's nothing like dusk in Paris for achieving peak hotness. It doesn't hurt that I'm completely, ridiculously, overwhelmingly in love.

Vale's tone grows more impatient. "We already gave each other presents." The bed squeaks.

"Don't you dare come in here!" I warn, glaring at the doorway.

Incoherent grumbling, followed by muffled footsteps that move away from me.

Smiling, I grab my favorite lotion—which is also Vale's favorite now—from the counter and rub it into my skin. In the mirror, my wings rise tall and proud over my shoulders, the edges sifting golden dust onto the bathroom floor. Izig will undoubtedly have something to say about it later, which is why I stashed a box of spicy dark chocolate croissants in the butler pantry this morning. It turns out the key to an ogre's heart is his stomach.

I set the lotion down and look at the door. As for the key to an *elf's* heart, well, I like to aim for something a bit lower.

When I enter the bedroom, Vale is slumped in his chair before the fire, his dressing gown gaping open and a disgruntled look on his face. That look vanishes, replaced with stupefaction, as I stroll toward him. I hide a smile as my husband slowly sits up, his jaw dropping.

"Do you like your present?" I ask, turning sideways and fluttering my wings. "It's me," I add. "I'm the present. Apologies in advance because I am *very* expensive."

"Worth it," Vale breathes, sitting forward and rubbing a hand over his mouth. His eyes glitter like chips of amber as he drags his gaze down my body. "Damn."

A thrill runs through me at the look of utter rapture on his face. I turn slowly, looking over my shoulder as I go, and he makes a choking sound. "Do you like it?" I ask, my tone all innocence.

He swallows hard. "Is that a…?" His chest rises and falls rapidly as he stares at my ass. "What

do you call that, exactly?"

"It's a g-string." I flick one of the bows at my hip, and he groans. "I thought maybe the ribbons were too much, but I don't know." I face him and run a hand down my chest to my cock, which is barely covered by a patch of white lace. "What do you think? Should I go for a different color next time? Maybe—"

"I think you should get the fuck over here," he growls, gripping the arms of his chair so tightly his knuckles turn white. "Now."

"Bossy," I murmur, going to him and climbing into his lap. His dressing gown gapes wider, and I fling it open so I can spread my palms over his chest. His cock stands up proudly between us. "Happy to see me?" I ask, settling more firmly on his spread thighs.

"Overjoyed," he growls, turning savage as he grips my ass in both hands and buries his face in my neck. "Obsessed," he says roughly, sucking at my pulse before sliding his lips to the hollow of my throat. He speaks between kisses and nips of his fangs. "Enthralled…entranced…driven out of my mind…by you."

"Sounds serious," I say, squeezing his shoulders as I throw my head back and grind my leaking dick against his stomach.

"It is." He digs his fingers into my cheeks and pulls me closer, his erection rubbing against my mine through the lace. "You might say it's incurable."

"Guess you're stuck with me, then."

His growl rumbles against my throat as he kisses his way back up my neck. "Gods, you always smell so good." He skims his fingers down the tiny string between my cheeks. "Taste good, too. And I'm starving, baby."

A shiver rushes over my flushed skin. "Are you going to devour me, *mon mari*?" My husband.

"Tout à fait." Absolutely. He bites my jaw gently before swiping his tongue up to the pointed tip of my ear. "The night you wore that little red thong to the bar, I wanted to throw you down and rip it off you with my teeth."

"Fuck," I whimper, thrusting my dick harder against his abs. "I wish you had."

"Yeah?" He yanks the g-string to one side and rubs a callused finger over my pucker. "You wanted that, baby? Wanted me to strip you bare and remind this pretty hole who owns it?"

"Uh-huh."

"Who owns it?" he demands, giving me the tip of his finger.

"You," I gasp, grabbing his face in both hands so I can slant my lips over his. Joy and lust fire through me as our tongues meet. Sex with Vale has always been incredible, but it takes on even more significance now that his memories are restored. We're not operating on glimpses and shadows anymore. Now, every bit of passion we shared when we first met is alive and real in his mind.

He takes control of our kiss, stroking his tongue boldly over mine. Still teasing my hole, he slips his other hand between us and frees my dick from the lace. Lust strikes like a hot iron as he wraps his hand around my cock and strokes.

"Oh, shit," I moan, bowing my spine and thrusting into his hand. He abandons my ass and smooths his other hand down my chest, toying with one of the bars through my nipples before continuing down to my abs. He leans back and watches me roll my hips.

"You are so beautiful," he whispers. Nostrils flared, he plays with the g-string, rubbing the ribbons at my hips and fingering the lace he pushed aside.

"Aren't you going to unwrap your present?" I ask, my breathing ragged.

A wicked expression gleams in his eyes as he continues pumping my dick. "I thought I might take

it out and play with it a bit first. The packaging is so pretty, I don't want it to go to waste."

"It's probably a good thing you didn't open it at the wedding," I tease.

In one powerful move, he stands and lifts me into his arms. The wickedness in his eyes flares higher as he carries me to the bed. "I think I'd better open it now, though."

"Gods, yes," I moan as he settles me in the center of the bed. He flings his dressing gown away, grabs lube, and positions us so I'm on my side with him spooning me from behind with my wings folded tightly between us. He claims my lips again as he pulls my topmost thigh to my chest and presses slick fingers into my cleft.

My cock jerks, and I moan as he finds my opening and pushes a finger inside. He sucks at my tongue as he pumps his finger gently in and out, grazing the spot that makes stars burst behind my closed lids. The fullness and pressure are good but not nearly enough.

"Hurry," I gasp against his lips. I hook my forearm behind my knee and pull my leg higher. "I need you, Vale."

"I know, baby. Let me get you ready for me." He tugs me more tightly against him and kisses me again—a slow, searing possession just as intimate as his finger stroking inside me. It's so fucking good and I'm so fucking close that I reach my free hand down and squeeze the base of my dick so I don't come.

He's just as affected. As he adds another finger, he breaks off our kiss and trembles against me. "I've been thinking about this all day," he says hoarsely. "Fuck, baby, it's all I think about." He withdraws his fingers and pets the lacy fabric nestled next to my balls. "And then you go and wear something like this, and I'm so turned on I can't think at all."

Pleasure steals my breath as he pushes three fingers inside me and strokes my prostate again.

"Oh, *fuck*," I say, shivering. "I'm glad you like it."

"I love it." He sucks on my lower lip before moving his mouth to my ear. "But I like it even better when you wear something else."

"What?"

"My cum." As my moan echoes around the bed, he replaces his fingers with his dick and pushes inside me. I shake as he kisses the tingling skin under my ear and drops his voice lower than I've ever heard it. "I love seeing my cream on your skin. In your hole. I'm going to fuck you so hard you'll leak me for days. You'll be covered in me, baby."

"Yes!" I cry, looping an arm around his head and twisting my upper body so I can deepen our kiss. As he works past my body's resistance, a fire spreads under my skin. No matter how many times I take him, I'm always mildly surprised at just how big his dick is. But I want it. With every thick inch, my need climbs higher, and then it roars as he seats himself to the hilt. "Oh gods, Vale. Yes, just like that. Fuck, you're so deep."

He breathes against my lips as he holds still, giving me a chance to adjust. "I'm right where I want to be," he says huskily, rubbing his big hand up and down the back of my thigh. He takes my lips in a tender kiss as he slides his hand lower, cupping my balls before giving my dick a couple of lazy strokes. "You feel so good, Jasper."

"Fuck me," I say on a broken whimper, desire forking through me like lightning. "Please. I need it."

"Avec plaisir, mon prince." With pleasure, my prince. The sweetest smile plays around his mouth as he uses the title I'm still not used to. He strokes my dick faster as he begins to thrust. "Anything you want. Everything you want."

"I love you," I whisper.

"I love you, too," he whispers back. Then he loves me with his body, pumping into me with steady, thorough thrusts. He stares into my eyes and whispers in French, telling me how much I mean to him, how nothing on this plane or any other can separate us, how he'd rather die than live without me beside him.

Tears clog my throat as I realize he fucking means it. He stood on that dais and risked his life when we said our vows. Fate could have struck him down. Instead, it delivered him into my arms.

"I'm never letting you go," I tell him.

My summer prince smiles, my declaration reflected back at me in his eyes as he picks up the pace, giving me the deep, ruthless strokes I crave. Pumping into me so hard and fast that the bed shakes and we're both reduced to moans and ragged breaths that war with the sexy, filthy sound of his cock slamming into me over and over.

"Look," he rasps, his hand working my dick. "Look at us."

I look down at the place where our bodies join. Vale's cock pumps into me, every thrust driving us closer together. Suddenly, his tattoo comes alive, the fine lines of the sun's rays sending vibrations into the most intimate part of my body. At the same moment, the night outside the window turns to day. Dusk disappears and dazzling daylight takes its place as Vale calls up his power.

Light dances over my skin and the edges of my wings spread over the bed. I gasp and tip my head back, basking in the unexpected warmth.

"That's it, baby," Vale says, his hand flying up and down my dick as he thrusts up and up, his hips a blur. "So damn perfect. Come for me. Come on."

My orgasm slams into me, and I cry out as I spurt into his hand and over my heaving stomach. A split second later, Vale shudders against me. His hot cum floods my ass, and his labored breaths stir my hair. We tremble together, both of us sweating and gasping for oxygen. The sunlight recedes from the bed like the tide rolling back from the shore. Outside, the sky flips back to a twinkling, purple dusk.

I laugh weakly. "You're going to get in trouble for that one."

Even gasping like he just ran a marathon, my husband manages to look as arrogant as any monarch-in-waiting. "And why is that?"

"Humans don't like it when you turn on the sun without warning."

"Too bad." He strokes a lock of damp hair away from my forehead. "I wanted to see you as you were that first day outside Mab's court, when you took pity on a besotted man and let him take you to lunch."

"Mmm. It's a good thing you're so clumsy."

His smile is as bright as the sunlight that still warms my skin as he pulls out and rolls me under him. He reaches down and fingers my rim, stroking through his cum that seeps from me. "You know, now that you're officially Mab's heir, these kinds of insults can be considered a declaration of war."

"Oh yeah?" Aftershocks ripple through me as his wicked fingers continue their exploration. "You want to do battle with me, Prince Vale?"

"Oui." He waggles his eyebrows. "I'm thinking a lot of skirmishes with swords."

I groan and shove him off me. As he falls to the bed laughing, I toss a handful of pixie dust at him. When he sneezes, I laugh and pull him up. "Come on, Your Highness. If you promise not to make any more bad puns, I'll let you wash my back in the shower."

One luxuriously long and frequently interrupted shower later, Vale and I sit before the fire in our matching chairs with wine glasses in our hands. A breeze from the open window tosses the flames.

"You know," I muse, turning my gaze to Vale, "I never told you how proud I am of you for not killing Melusine on the spot after Mab told you who she was."

Vale smiles, his golden eyes reflecting the fire. "Like I said, baby, I'm a patient man."

"Still, after what she did to your father, it took a lot of control to stand on that dais and let the wedding play out."

"I had to," he says. "I couldn't let anything interfere with my vow. That was the trickiest part—making sure I kept my word and satisfied the magic. Thank the gods Liriel caught on and did her part, too."

"She's smart."

"She is," Vale says, affection in his tone.

We fall into comfortable silence, basking in each other's company and the wine warming our veins. Memories of the icy ballroom and the abrupt marriage ceremony run through my head.

After a moment, Vale looks at me. "What are you thinking about?"

"That I always envisioned my wedding as something far more ostentatious and colorful than what we had."

A smile dances in his eyes. "Nothing says we can't get married again."

"But…another wedding?"

"Baby," he chides softly, "you mean to tell me the future pixie king is thinking of turning down a chance to throw a party?"

"Never."

Vale extends his hand across the space between us. When I grasp his fingers, he rubs his thumb over my knuckles. "We'll renew our vows once a year. You can throw the biggest, most colorful wedding you want. Because my love for you is only going to get bigger."

My breath hitches. "You're a hopelessly romantic man, Vale Gentry."

"Hopelessly in love with you, baby."

"Of course you are." I gesture to myself. "I mean, look at me."

His eyes crinkle at the corners. "I'll take you on a honeymoon every year, too."

"Ooh, yes, and we'll take Liriel and Ceri."

Vale frowns. "On our honeymoon?"

"Just this first one. I promised them we'd take a gaycation together now that they're out. And our first stop is gonna be a clothing store because those two need to lose the floor-length gowns stat." As he grins, I squeeze his hand. "Plus, it'll give you and Liriel a chance to work on Summer Court stuff." My heart swells as I think of the surprising—and delightful—partnership that has sprung up between Vale and Liriel. Now that Vale is taking a more active role as his father's heir, Liriel has become something like a right-hand woman, serving as Vale's eyes and ears whenever he's away from court.

Vale's eyes soften. "I'd like that. Liriel is an excellent manager."

"Ceri and I have been calling it *manipulator*, but whatever."

"That's not too far off," Vale says, chuckling. "Despite my best efforts, the Summer Court remains a backstabbing, political place. But Liriel has navigated politics her whole life. She knows how to maneuver around petty disputes to achieve a goal. I'm grateful for her help."

"The two of you are going to change things, Vale. I see your vision for the future, and it's beautiful."

He lifts my hand to his lips. “Because you’re in it.”

“Do I look good in this future of yours?” I ask, my heart beating faster at the lust glittering in his golden gaze.

“Gorgeous,” he murmurs, flicking his tongue over my knuckles.

“Do you two think you’ll ever stop being gross together?” Bert asks in my head. A second later, he jumps from the windowsill into the bedroom. A yowl drifts from outside, and then Sully leaps through the opening and lands gracefully. Together, they move toward the fire—Bert’s steps a whole lot less graceful than Sully’s. The skin around his ears has a distinctive green tinge.

I set my wine glass on the table next to me. “Have you two been drinking?”

Sully goes to Vale and sits at my husband’s knee. The cat blinks lazily at me, his expression as aloof as ever.

“Don’t lie to me,” I warn.

Sully licks a paw and swipes it behind his ear.

“You smell like gin,” I say, glancing at Bert. “Both of you.”

Vale laughs.

Bert staggers to the rug and collapses on his side. His tail thumps once against the floor. *“I’m dying. Don’t let Mert give my eulogy. He’s terrible at public speaking.”*

Sighing, I stand and head for the bathroom, where I started keeping honey after the third time Sully and Bert hit the Parisian club scene. “I told you not to go drinking with Sulien,” I say over my shoulder. “He’s a bad influence.”

“Please,” Sully scoffs in my head. *“It’s the other way around.”*

“Yeah, right,” I say aloud as I swing around. “Vale, tell your cat—” I clamp my mouth shut, shock rooting me to the floor.

Vale and Sully freeze, twin pairs of golden eyes going wide. On the rug, Bert lifts his head, his drunken stupor fading.

“Wait,” he says through our bond. *“You heard him?”*

“Yeah,” I croak, staring at Sully. “Clear as a fucking bell.”

Sully tilts his head. *“You hear me.”*

“Yes.” I drag in a breath. “I hear you.”

Vale rises slowly, his expression transforming from stunned to a mix of awe and curiosity. “Do you think it’s because you’ve been working with Mab?”

“No idea.” I swallow hard. “I mean, *she* obviously hears him. She mentioned something about me gaining new gifts now that she named me heir, but when I asked about it she said we’d cover it after we discussed the dental plan.”

“The pixie court has a dental plan?”

“No.”

Vale stares for a moment. Then he closes the distance between us and tips my chin up. Love and laughter glimmer in his eyes. “Never a dull moment.”

I step into him and twine my arms around his neck. “If you wanted boring, Vale Gentry, you bumped into the wrong pixie.”

“Oh, I don’t want boring,” he says. “I want you, baby, and every bit of your chaos.” Resting his hands on my hips, he lowers his head and kisses me.

“Gross,” Bert says in my head.

The fire crackles in the hearth as my summer prince deepens our kiss. And when he lifts his head at last, he tugs me to the window. In the distance, the Eiffel Tower twinkles under a sky full of stars.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe, resting my head on Vale’s shoulder. “I don’t want this night to end.”

“It’s not ending.” He runs a gentle hand down the curve of my wing, gathering pixie dust. He flings it into the night, setting all of Villette sparkling. Then he turns me toward him and cups his hands around my face. “This fairy tale is just beginning,” he says softly.

And then he seals his promise with a true love’s kiss.

About Anna Fury

Anna Fury is a North Carolina native, fluent in snark and sarcasm, tiki decor, and an aficionado of phallic plants. Visit her on Instagram for a glimpse of the sexiest wiener wallpaper you've ever seen. She currently lives in North Carolina with her Mr. Right, a tiny tornado, and a lovely old dog.

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Amy Pennza is a USA Today Bestselling Author of steamy paranormal and contemporary romance. After stints as a lawyer and a soldier, she discovered her dream job is writing about stubborn alphas and smart heroines. She lives in the Great Lakes region with her husband and five children.

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